



Profiles in
Adoption
*ADULT
ADOPTEE
EXPERIENCES*

By Ryan Hanlon, Nicole Davi, Matthew Quade, and Abigail Lindner

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Profiles in Adoption: Adult Adoptee Experiences ©

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Pictured: Mrs. Linda Sharp (left), NCFA past Board Chair Heidi Cox (center), and Dr. Wayne Sharp (right)

Thank you, Wayne and Linda!

Content Reviewers

In the development of our survey, we engaged subject matter experts in adoption as well as professionals involved with each type of adoption.

Before launching the survey, National Council For Adoption piloted the survey with adoptees from each type of adoption, asking them to provide feedback about the clarity of the questions and their experience completing the survey.

Our survey was improved due to the helpful feedback we received from these adoptees and professionals. *Thank you!*

Survey Participants

Finally, we wish to thank the survey participants who completed this survey and spent time thoughtfully sharing their perspectives and experiences. Their contributions are critical to improving general knowledge about adoption and adoptee experiences. *Thank you!*

Introduction

This research project aims to enhance understanding of adult adoptees in the United States. Given the millions of adoptees in the United States, with enormously diverse backgrounds, experiences, interests, and beliefs, fully understanding and defining such a large group is an impossible task. However, seeking to better understand this population is something we can aim for. While some aspects of adoptee experiences and outcomes are well-researched, others are less known, such as “the nuances of their experiences, the best parenting strategies, or the children's development over the course of their lives”, not to mention well-being into adulthood.¹ Fortunately, as social science knowledge deepens and adoptees are increasingly welcomed to share their experiences,² we are gradually gaining a better understanding of the long-term impacts of adoption on adoptees and their families and how the adoptive environment can often effect positive change in the physical, cognitive, mental, and behavioral health of adoptees.

We were fortunate to have a large sample of respondents in this report – yet we recognize that it is a minute fraction of the adult adoptees in the United States. Our sample provides a snapshot: one cross-section of adult adoptees in the U.S., intended to contribute to the growing body of research that seeks to better understand adoptees from their own perspectives. Rather than offering extended commentary, our approach was to let the respondents’ answers serve as the focal point. As such, we have presented the questions asked and the respondents’ answers in tables for readers’ analysis. The open-ended questions were analyzed thematically and are presented along with quotations that serve as examples of the themes provided.

1 Fergusson, B. (2022, Dec. 6). What really helps adopted children thrive? BBC.
<https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20221124-what-really-helps-adopted-children-thrive/>

2 Gruneisen, R. (2023, Apr. 27). The value of adoptee voices. *Adoption Advocate*, 172.
<https://adoptioncouncil.org/publications/the-value-of-adoptee-voices/>

Report Highlights

- The majority of adoptees are satisfied with their adoption and have overall life satisfaction.
- The majority of adoptees believe adoption can work in the best interests of adoptees, birth parents, and adoptive parents.
- Many adoptees lack information about their birth family health history.
- Many adoptees wanted but did not receive post-adoption services.
- Adoptees stressed the importance of open and honest communication about adoption-related issues.
- Adoptees emphasized the importance of birth family connections/engagement.

Sample

In the summer of 2023, National Council For Adoption launched the *Profiles in Adoption* national survey of adoptees. Eligibility was restricted to those who were at least 18 years old, who were adopted into an American family before they were age 18, and whose adoption was not by a stepparent.

There were 1,247 eligible respondents whose adoptions were either from foster care (n=154), private domestic adoption (n=617), intercountry adoption (447), or were classified as “Other” (n=29). Of those who selected “Other” examples include individuals who describe being adopted from an orphanage or group home in the U.S., two who describe illicit adoptions, an individual who only described it as “kinship” and one who wrote, “unknown.”

The sample was primarily comprised of females (n=984), while males (n=239) and other (n=24) had far fewer responses. See Table 2 for a breakdown of gender by type of adoption. The race and ethnicity of respondents varied considerably by type of adoption; this breakdown is shown in Table 3 below. The majority of foster care and private domestic adoption respondents self-identified as White, and the majority of intercountry adoption respondents identified as Asian/Pacific Islander.

Methodology

The *Profiles in Adoption* national survey of adoptees was conducted in June and July of 2023. Participants were recruited via email and listserv invitations from National Council For Adoption (NCFA), its stakeholders, and adoption community contacts. Participants joined the study by clicking on the survey link, which directed them to information about the study (i.e., the informed consent page) and those who chose to move forward answered questions confirming their eligibility. Following this, respondents completed a one-time survey, which included questions about their demographic information, views on adoption-related issues, experiences as adoptees, and more. All participants had the option to enter to win one of twenty-five individual \$50 Amazon gift cards. The survey was built using Qualtrics and statistical analysis was done via SPSS version 29.

To reduce bias and allow for adoptee responses to be accurately represented, open-ended responses were analyzed using inductive coding and reflexive thematic analysis. Codes were established as common responses emerged, which were then grouped into key themes and subthemes. This process was completed using Excel.

Characteristics and Demographics

The time period of adoption was determined by asking respondents their current age and their age at the time of adoption to determine the time period they were born.

Adoptions by Decade					
Decade	Foster Care	Private Domestic	Intercountry	Other	Total
2000 and later	23	16	162	1	202
1990s	21	70	89	2	182
1980s	23	106	83	2	214
1970s	38	126	71	3	238
1960s	40	176	27	15	258
1950s and earlier	9	123	15	6	153

Table 1. Time period of respondents' adoptions by type of adoption

Survey Question: What is your gender?

Gender	Foster Care N = 154	Private Domestic N = 617	Intercountry N = 447
Male	26.0%	23.0%	11.6%
Female	70.8%	75.0%	86.8%
Other	3.2%	1.9%	1.6%

Table 2. Gender by type of adoption

Survey Question: What is your race/ethnicity?

Race	Foster Care N = 154	Private Domestic N = 617	Intercountry N = 447
American Indian/Alaskan Native	1.3%	0.3%	0.2%
Asian/Pacific Islander	5.2%	1.6%	76.5%
Black (non-Hispanic)	11.1%	2.9%	1.3%
Hispanic and/or Latino(a)	4.6%	1.6%	6.5%
White (non-Hispanic)	64.7%	84.3%	8.9%
Multiracial	9.2%	7.0%	3.4%
Other	3.9%	2.3%	3.1%

Table 3. Race/Ethnicity by type of adoption

Profiles in Adoption

Adult Adoptee Experiences

Survey Question: Do you personally identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer (LGBTQ)?

LGBTQ Status	Foster Care N = 154	Private Domestic N = 617	Intercountry N = 447
Yes	16.9%	12.6%	17.4%
No	80.5%	84.3%	79.4%
Prefer not to answer	2.6%	3.1%	3.1%

Table 4. LGBTQ status by type of adoption

Survey Question: What is your religious affiliation (if any)?

Religion	Foster Care N = 154	Private Domestic N = 617	Intercountry N = 447
Buddhism	0.6%	0.8%	1.3%
Catholic/Christianity	26.0%	20.7%	19.1%
Protestant/Christianity	32.5%	28.5%	31.2%
Hinduism	0.0%	0.0%	0.4%
Islam	0.0%	0.0%	0.2%
Judaism	4.5%	5.2%	4.0%
No religious affiliation	30.5%	33.4%	35.9%
Other	5.8%	11.4%	7.8%

Table 5. Religious affiliation by type of adoption

Survey Question: Do you personally have a diagnosed disability?

The Americans with Disabilities Act defines a person with a disability as “a person who has a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities, a person who has a history or record of such an impairment, or a person who is perceived by others as having such an impairment.”

Disability Status	Foster Care N = 154	Private Domestic N = 617	Intercountry N = 447
Yes	23.4%	20.1%	17.7%
No	76.6%	79.9%	82.3%

Table 6. Diagnosed disability status by type of adoption

Profiles in Adoption

Adult Adoptee Experiences

Survey Question: Have you ever served in any branch of the U.S. Military?

Military Status	Foster Care N = 154	Private Domestic N = 617	Intercountry N = 447
Yes	4.5%	5.7%	1.6%
No	95.5%	94.3%	98.4%

Table 7. Military service by type of adoption

Current Family Structure

Survey Question: What is your current marital status?

Marital Status	Foster Care N = 154	Private Domestic N = 617	Intercountry N = 447
Single, never married	29.9%	18.5%	56.6%
Married	55.2%	62.2%	35.8%
Divorced/separated	13.6%	15.7%	6.9%
Widowed	1.3%	3.6%	0.7%

Table 8. Marital status by type of adoption

Survey Question: Are you a parent? If so, how many children do you have?

Number of Children	Foster Care N = 154	Private Domestic N = 617	Intercountry N = 447
No children	89.1%	29.9%	67.6%
1 child	5.9%	15.6%	9.4%
2 children	4.0%	32.0%	15.4%
3 children	1.0%	15.1%	4.9%
4 or more children	0.0%	7.5%	2.7%

Table 9. Parental status by type of adoption

Survey Question: Have you adopted any children? If so, how many?

Number of Adopted Children	Foster Care N = 154	Private Domestic N = 617	Intercountry N = 447
No adopted children	89.1%	89.6%	89.0%
1 adopted child	5.9%	5.8%	4.8%
2 adopted children	4.0%	3.5%	4.8%
3 adopted children	1.0%	0.7%	0.7%
4 or more adopted children	0.0%	0.5%	0.7%

Table 10. Adoptive parent status by type of adoption

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Survey Question: Have you ever placed a child for adoption?

Placed Child for Adoption	Foster Care N = 154	Private Domestic N = 617	Intercountry N = 447
Yes	3.2%	2.6%	1.8%
No	96.8%	97.4%	98.2%

Table 11. Birth parent status by type of adoption

Adoptive Household

Survey Question: Were you adopted by a single parent or by two parents?

Adoptive Parents	Foster Care N = 154	Private Domestic N = 617	Intercountry N = 447
Single parent	3.9%	1.0%	7.0%
Two parents	96.1%	99.0%	93.0%

Table 12. Single-parent or two-parent adoptions

Survey Question: Were you related to the adoptive parents prior to the adoptive placement? (e.g., grandparent, aunt, uncle, cousin, etc.)

Relation to Adoptive Parent	Foster Care N = 154	Private Domestic N = 617	Intercountry N = 447
Yes	3.9%	2.4%	0.4%
No	96.1%	97.6%	99.6%

Table 13. Relative adoption status

Survey Question: Are you the same race as either one or both adoptive parents (or sole adoptive parent)?

Same Race as Adoptive Parent(s)	Foster Care N = 154	Private Domestic N = 617	Intercountry N = 447
Same race/ethnicity as one adoptive parent	16.9%	13.3%	5.8%
Same race/ethnicity as both adoptive parents	57.1%	73.3%	5.8%
Different race/ethnicity than adoptive parent(s)	21.4%	9.2%	86.1%
Other	4.5%	4.2%	2.2%

Table 14. Race of adoptees compared to adoptive parents

Education Levels

Survey Question: What is the highest level of education completed by each of the following individuals?

Adoption from Foster Care

N = 154	Self	Adoptive Mother	Adoptive Father	Birth Mother	Birth Father
Less than GED	1.3%	5.2%	8.5%	9.7%	9.7%
GED or Diploma	24.7%	33.3%	26.8%	35.1%	28.6%
Associate's	13.0%	17.0%	7.2%	4.5%	3.2%
Bachelor's	30.5%	21.6%	28.1%	9.1%	7.8%
Master's	27.3%	17.0%	18.3%	5.8%	4.5%
Doctoral/Professional	3.2%	4.6%	7.8%	1.9%	3.2%
Don't know	0.0%	1.3%	3.3%	33.8%	42.9%

Table 15. Education levels of members of foster care adoption triad

Private Domestic Adoption

N = 617	Self	Adoptive Mother	Adoptive Father	Birth Mother	Birth Father
Less than GED	0.3%	3.4%	3.1%	4.7%	3.7%
GED or Diploma	16.2%	33.9%	22.1%	29.6%	20.2%
Associate's	8.9%	11.8%	7.2%	8.0%	2.3%
Bachelor's	37.8%	31.9%	30.6%	17.8%	13.8%
Master's	28.8%	13.6%	19.5%	5.7%	4.7%
Doctoral/Professional	7.8%	3.6%	15.0%	1.3%	3.6%
Don't know	0.2%	1.8%	2.6%	32.9%	51.6%

Table 16. Education levels of members of private domestic adoption triad

Intercountry Adoption

N = 447	Self	Adoptive Mother	Adoptive Father	Birth Mother	Birth Father
Less than GED	0.4%	2.2%	2.7%	5.8%	1.8%
GED or Diploma	30.6%	23.3%	24.9%	2.7%	2.5%
Associate's	7.8%	11.9%	8.9%	0.7%	0.4%
Bachelor's	32.9%	31.3%	26.3%	0.4%	0.9%
Master's	23.0%	20.8%	19.0%	0.2%	0.0%
Doctoral/Professional	5.1%	9.2%	11.2%	0.2%	0.0%
Don't know	0.0%	1.3%	6.9%	89.9%	94.4%

Table 17. Education levels of members of intercountry adoption triad

General Adoption Considerations

Adoption Satisfaction

Adoptees were asked to respond to the following statement: Overall, I am satisfied with my adoption.

They were asked to choose along a five-point Likert scale between the following options: Strongly disagree, Disagree, Neither agree nor disagree, Agree, Strongly agree. These answer choices were then coded 1-5, respectively.

Of the respondents who were adopted from foster care (N=154), they had a mean score of 3.32 (SD=1.61). For those who had been placed through private domestic adoption (N=617), they had a mean score of 3.49 (SD = 1.63). For those adopted through intercountry adoption (N=447), they had a mean score of 4.07 (SD = 1.31).

Comparing Adoptees with Parents of Same vs. Different Race/Ethnicity

Respondents' adoption satisfaction scores were also examined by combining all types of adoption and comparing between adoptees whose parents were a different race compared to those who have at least one parent who is the same race using a t-test. Adoptees whose adoptive parents are both a different race/ethnicity (n=478) had a mean adoption satisfaction score of 3.89 (SD = 1.45). Adoptees who have at least one parent the same race/ethnicity (n=725) had a mean adoption satisfaction score of 3.57 (SD = 1.59). The mean adoption satisfaction score of these two groups were significantly different from one another at $p < .001$.

Key Takeaway: The majority of adoptees indicate satisfaction with their adoption. Adoptees who were adopted by parents of a different race/ethnicity did not have reduced adoption satisfaction.

Life Satisfaction

Survey Prompt: Please rate the extent to which you agree with the following statements.

- In most ways, my life is close to ideal.
- The conditions of my life are excellent.
- I am satisfied with my life.
- So far, I have gotten the important things I want in life.
- If I could live my life over, I would change almost nothing.

The statements are from the Satisfaction With Life Scale (SWLS)³ and the response choices were modified from the original SWLS seven-point Likert scale to a five-point Likert scale to conform with other answer choices throughout the survey.

Of the respondents who were adopted from foster care (N=154), they had a mean score of 3.37 (SD=1.17). For those who had been placed through private domestic adoption (N=617), they had a mean score of 3.56 (SD = 1.19). For those adopted through intercountry adoption (N=447), they had a mean score of 3.99 (SD = 0.94).

Comparing Adoptees with Parents of Same or Different Race/Ethnicity

Respondents' life satisfaction scores were also examined by combining all types of adoption and comparing adoptees whose parents were a different race compared to those who have at least one parent who is the same race using a t-test. Adoptees whose adoptive parents are both a different race/ethnicity (n=478) had a mean life satisfaction score of 3.89 (SD = 1.01). Adoptees who have at least one parent of the same race/ethnicity (n=724) had a mean life satisfaction score of 3.59 (SD = 1.16). The mean life satisfaction scores of these two groups were statistically different from one another at $p < .001$.

Key Takeaway: The majority of adoptees indicate relatively good satisfaction with their life. Adoptees who were adopted by parents of a different race/ethnicity did not have reduced life satisfaction.

³ Diener, E., Emmons, R. A., Larsen, R. J., & Griffin, S. (1985). The Satisfaction with Life Scale. *Journal of Personality Assessment*, 49, 71-75.

Education, Career, and Marital Status/Family Satisfaction

Survey Prompt: Please rate the extent to which you agree with the following statements.

- All in all, I am satisfied with my education.
- All in all, I am satisfied with my career.
- All in all, I am satisfied with my current marital status/family.

Respondents were asked to choose along a five-point Likert scale between the following options: Strongly disagree, Disagree, Neither agree nor disagree, Agree, Strongly agree. Their answers appear in the three tables below.

Adoption from Foster Care

N = 154	Education	Career	Marital status / Family
Strongly disagree	5.2%	8.4%	5.8%
Somewhat disagree	8.4%	7.1%	7.8%
Neither agree nor disagree	9.1%	14.3%	12.3%
Somewhat agree	30.5%	36.4%	26.0%
Strongly agree	46.8%	33.8%	48.1%

Table 18. Adoptee satisfaction with education, career, and marital status/family (Foster Care)

Private Domestic Adoption

N = 617	Education	Career	Marital status / Family
Strongly disagree	6.3%	5.7%	5.5%
Somewhat disagree	10.6%	9.4%	9.1%
Neither agree nor disagree	6.8%	10.2%	9.3%
Somewhat agree	23.4%	29.5%	17.7%
Strongly agree	52.9%	45.1%	58.4%

Table 19. Adoptee satisfaction with education, career, and marital status/family (Private Domestic)

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Intercountry Adoption

N = 447	Education	Career	Marital status / Family
Strongly disagree	2.0%	1.6%	1.8%
Somewhat disagree	6.5%	4.5%	6.5%
Neither agree nor disagree	5.1%	17.1%	11.9%
Somewhat agree	27.7%	35.8%	18.1%
Strongly agree	58.6%	41.0%	61.7%

Table 20. Adoptee satisfaction with education, career, and marital status/family (Intercountry)

Key Takeaway: Across three important domains in life, a large majority of adoptees express satisfaction.

Views on Best Interests

Survey Prompt: Please rate the extent to which you agree with the following statements.

- Adoption can work in children's best interest.
- Adoption can work in birth parents' best interest.
- Adoption can work in adoptive parents' best interest.

Respondents were asked to choose along a five-point Likert scale between the following options: Strongly disagree, Disagree, Neither agree nor disagree, Agree, Strongly agree. Their answers appear in the three tables below.

Adoption from Foster Care

N = 154	Adoption Can Work in Best Interest of:		
	Children	Birth parents	Adoptive parents
Strongly disagree	14.9%	13.6%	3.2%
Somewhat disagree	12.3%	14.9%	4.5%
Neither agree nor disagree	12.3%	14.9%	9.1%
Somewhat agree	25.3%	22.7%	33.1%
Strongly agree	35.1%	33.8%	50.0%

Table 21. Adoptees' views on adoption working in best interest of parties involved (Foster Care)

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Private Domestic Adoption

N = 617	Adoption Can Work in Best Interest of:		
	Children	Birth parents	Adoptive parents
Strongly disagree	15.9%	13.2%	5.7%
Somewhat disagree	12.8%	13.2%	5.0%
Neither agree nor disagree	10.2%	15.1%	10.1%
Somewhat agree	18.5%	18.5%	26.1%
Strongly agree	42.5%	40.0%	53.1%

Table 22. Adoptees' views on adoption working in best interest of parties involved (Private Domestic)

Intercountry

N = 447	Adoption Can Work in Best Interest of:		
	Children	Birth parents	Adoptive parents
Strongly disagree	3.1%	3.4%	2.5%
Somewhat disagree	5.4%	6.9%	1.1%
Neither agree nor disagree	11.9%	15.9%	11.2%
Somewhat agree	29.8%	32.7%	26.7%
Strongly agree	49.9%	41.2%	58.5%

Table 23. Adoptees' views on adoption working in best interest of parties involved (Intercountry)

Key Takeaway: A majority of adoptees believe that adoption can work in the best interests of adoptees, birth parents, and adoptive parents.

Preferred Terminology

Survey Question: When discussing your status as an individual who was adopted, what terminology do you most prefer to be used?

Preferred Terminology	Foster Care N = 154	Private Domestic N = 617	Intercountry N = 447
Adoptee	42.2%	36.6%	35.1%
Adopted individual	3.2%	4.2%	2.5%
Adopted person	10.4%	12.3%	7.6%
Other	1.9%	5.3%	3.8%
No opinion	42.2%	41.5%	51.0%

Table 24. Adoptees' preferred terminology

Key Takeaway: Although a plurality of adoptee respondents did not have an opinion, those that did preferred "adoptee."

Openness in Adoption

Before answering questions about openness, the survey stated: The following questions relate to the degree of openness in your adoption. Openness is the connection/contact an adoptee and/or adoptive family has/have with the birth family.

Survey Question: Do you have knowledge about the identity of any members of your birth family?

Knowledge of Birth Family	Foster Care N = 154	Private Domestic N = 617	Intercountry N = 447
Yes	82.5%	83.5%	25.5%
No	17.5%	16.5%	74.5%

Table 25. Adoptees' knowledge of birth family by type of adoption

Survey Question: To what extent do you have information about your birth family medical history? Please choose the response that best fills in the blank for the below statement:

I have ____ of my birth family's medical history information.

Birth Family Medical History	Foster Care N = 154	Private Domestic N = 617	Intercountry N = 447
None	18.2%	18.2%	82.9%
Minimal amount	38.3%	37.5%	12.6%
Moderate amount	27.9%	27.3%	3.6%
Most	13.6%	13.1%	0.7%
Complete record	1.9%	3.9%	0.2%

Table 26. Adoptees' knowledge of birth family medical history

Key Takeaway: A large majority of adoptees lack adequate information about their birth family medical history.

Adoptive Parents' Views on Relationship with Birth Family

The following question was only provided to adoptees who indicated at least one adoptive parent was still alive and who currently have communication with birth family.

Survey Prompt: Please rate the extent to which you agree with the following statements.

- My adoptive parent(s) are comfortable with my communication/relationship with my birth family.
- My adoptive parent(s) support me having a relationship with my birth family.

Their responses are provided in the tables below.

Adoption from Foster Care

N = 60	Comfortable With Communication/Relationship	Support Relationship
Strongly disagree	15.0%	11.7%
Somewhat disagree	26.7%	20.0%
Neither agree nor disagree	13.3%	11.7%
Somewhat agree	23.3%	28.3%
Strongly agree	21.7%	28.3%

Table 27. Adoptive parents' views of adoptees' relationship with birth family (Foster Care)

Private Domestic Adoption

N = 246	Comfortable With Communication/Relationship	Support Relationship
Strongly disagree	20.7%	16.7%
Somewhat disagree	17.5%	10.2%
Neither agree nor disagree	16.7%	14.2%
Somewhat agree	19.1%	28.9%
Strongly agree	26.0%	30.1%

Table 28. Adoptive parents' views of adoptees' relationship with birth family (Private Domestic)

Intercountry Adoption

N = 132	Comfortable With Communication/Relationship	Support Relationship
Strongly disagree	6.8%	6.8%
Somewhat disagree	6.8%	4.5%
Neither agree nor disagree	2.3%	4.5%
Somewhat agree	25.0%	13.6%
Strongly agree	59.1%	70.5%

Table 29. Adoptive parents' views of adoptees' relationship with birth family (Intercountry)

Race and Adoption

The following two questions were only asked to those who answered they are a different race/ethnicity than their adoptive parent(s).

Survey Question: Do you believe your adoptive parent(s) did a sufficient job at discussing issues of race/ethnicity with you?

Adoptive Parents Job Discussing Issues of Race/Ethnicity	Foster Care N = 33	Private Domestic N = 57	Intercountry N = 385
Sufficient	48.5%	19.3%	53.8%
Insufficient	51.5%	80.7%	46.2%

Table 30. Adoptees' views on parents sufficiently discussing race

Survey Question: Do you believe future adoptive parents should be allowed to adopt a child who is a different race/ethnicity than they are?

Adoptive Parents Should Be Allowed to Adopt Child of Different Race/Ethnicity	Foster Care N = 33	Private Domestic N = 57	Intercountry N = 385
Agree	78.8%	48.2%	89.5%
Disagree	21.2%	51.8%	10.5%

Table 31. Adoptees' Views on Adopting a Child of a Different Race

Key Takeaway: While a majority of adoptees felt their parents insufficiently addressed discussions of race, a majority also believe adoptive parents should be allowed to adopt a child of a different race or ethnicity.

Annual Recognition of Adoption

Survey Question: Some adoptive families annually recognize the day their family was joined through adoption. They have different names for this, including "family day," "adoption day," or "gotcha day" among others. Did your family have an annual recognition of this nature?

For those that answered "no" they were asked:

Do you wish your family had recognized a "family day" or "adoption day" each year?

For those who answered "yes" they were asked:

Would you recommend to future adoptive families that they recognize a "family day" or "adoption day" each year?

Adoption from Foster Care

	Yes	No
Family had annual recognition of adoption	42 (27.5%)	112 (72.5%)
Wish family had annual recognition of adoption	17 (15.5%)	95 (84.5%)
Recommend families have annual recognition of adoption	32 (76.2%)	10 (23.8%)

Table 32. Adoptees' reflections on the annual celebration of their adoption (Foster Care)

Private Domestic Adoption

	Yes	No
Family had annual recognition of adoption	91 (14.8%)	526 (85.2%)
Wish family had annual recognition of adoption	72 (13.6%)	454 (86.4%)
Recommend families have annual recognition of adoption	62 (67.8%)	29 (32.2%)

Table 33. Adoptees' reflections on the annual celebration of their adoption (Private Domestic)

Intercountry Adoption

	Yes	No
Family had annual recognition of adoption	227 (50.7%)	220 (49.3%)
Wish family had annual recognition of adoption	66 (30%)	154 (70%)
Recommend families have annual recognition of adoption	211 (92.8%)	16 (7.2%)

Table 34. Adoptees' reflections on the annual celebration of their adoption (Intercountry)

Key Takeaway: Among adoptees who had an annual celebration, the majority think other families should celebrate this, too. Among adoptees who did not have an annual celebration, they do not wish their family had done this.

Genetic Testing

Survey Question: Have you done genetic/DNA testing?

Genetic Testing	Foster Care N = 154	Private Domestic N = 617	Intercountry N = 447
Yes	68.8%	70.0%	64.2%
No	31.2%	30.0%	35.8%

Table 35. Adoptee DNA testing

Only those who responded “Yes” to having completed DNA testing were asked:

For what purpose(s) did you complete genetic testing? (Please select all that apply.)

Reasons for Genetic Testing (select all that apply)	Foster Care N = 106	Private Domestic N = 432	Intercountry N = 287
Understand medical situation/condition	20.8%	16.9%	12.5%
Obtain general health information	34.4%	33.1%	32.0%
Search for relatives	47.4%	48.0%	39.6%
Learn more about ancestry	61.0%	60.5%	51.2%

Table 36. Reasons for genetic testing

Key Takeaway: Approximately two-thirds of adoptees completed DNA testing, with more doing so to better understand ancestry and to find relatives rather than for health-related reasons.

Post-Adoption Support Services

Survey Question: Have you received supportive services related to your status as an adoptee? (e.g., therapy, birth family search, support groups, etc.)

Received Supportive Services	Foster Care N = 154	Private Domestic N = 617	Intercountry N = 447
Yes	63.0%	56.6%	49.4%
No	37.0%	43.4%	50.6%

Table 37. Adoptee receipt of support services

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Those who responded “yes” were asked the following question:

Which services did you utilize post-adoption? (Please choose all that apply.)

Services Utilized Post-Adoption (select all that apply)	Foster Care N = 97	Private Domestic N = 349	Intercountry N = 221
Therapy/counseling for self	44.2%	39.5%	33.8%
Adoptee support group	37.0%	29.7%	23.3%
Search/reunion assistance to locate birth family	24.0%	32.3%	17.9%
Contact/relationship mediation with birth family	12.3%	9.4%	3.6%
Other	5.2%	5.8%	8.3%

Table 38. Type of post-adoption services utilized by adoptees

Survey Question: Are there any support services you wish you had post-adoption, but you were unable to access them?

Services You Couldn't Access, but Desired	Foster Care N = 154	Private Domestic N = 617	Intercountry N = 447
Yes	62.1%	51.9%	46.8%
No	37.9%	48.1%	53.2%

Table 39. Adoptees unable to access post-adoption services

Survey Question: Which support services do you wish you had post-adoption, but were unable to access? (Please choose all that apply.)

Services Desired, but Inaccessible Post-Adoption (select all that apply)	Foster Care N = 96	Private Domestic N = 320	Intercountry N = 209
Therapy/counseling for self	44.8%	31.4%	25.3%
Adoptee support group	40.9%	27.4%	27.7%
Search/reunion assistance to locate birth family	37.7%	25.9%	28.6%
Contact/relationship mediation with birth family	27.9%	22.7%	23.0%
Other	12.3%	16.7%	11.2%

Table 40. Type of inaccessible post-adoption services

Key Takeaway: A majority of adoptees wanted to access post-adoption support, but they could not, with the most desired service being therapy/counseling.

Adoption from Foster Care

These questions were only asked of those who stated that they were adopted from foster care.

Factors in Choosing Adoptive Parents

Survey Question: What do you think are important factors to consider when placing a child with adoptive parents? (Please select all that apply.)

Important Factors to Consider when Choosing Adoptive Parents (Select all that apply)	N = 147
Adoptive parents' age	64.3%
Adoptive parents' race	50.6%
Lack of/or number of children already in home	51.9%
Adoptive parents' views on openness in adoption	39.0%
Adoptive parents' political, social, and/or religious views	38.3%
Other	59.1%

Table 41. Adoptees' views of important factors when choosing parents (Foster Care)

Advice for Improving Foster Care Adoptions

Foster care adoptees were then given the following open-ended question:

In brief, what do you think should be done to improve adoptions from foster care in the United States?

We received and analyzed 125 responses. Several common themes emerged, including placement and permanency decisions, caregiver screening and training, access to support and services, and access to information.

Adoptees discussed their views on placement and permanency decisions, suggesting prioritization of family preservation and reunification; many also advocated for kinship care and guardianship as options. Adoptees emphasized that the child's best interests should guide placement decisions and suggested that children be included in the decision-making process. For instance, one adoptee wrote, *"One of the most important things we can do, is have the child more involved in the decision process of where they will be placed. It is so important for them to be placed somewhere 'they chose' rather than just being placed with a family the agency chooses. What an agency thinks is a good fit may not be what a child feels is a good fit for them."* Some also advised that adoptions should only be completed if a child is old enough to consent. Furthermore, adoptees stressed the significance of thorough caregiver screening and training, suggesting that foster and adoptive parents should undergo more comprehensive evaluations of their motivations and parenting capabilities. They also called for ongoing check-ins and monitoring post-adoption to ensure the suitability of placements over time. Adoptees stressed the importance of increased training on trauma, birth family openness, and parenting a child of a different race. They advocated for increased encouragement of birth family openness and improved enforcement of birth family visitation. One respondent explained, *"...visits with family members should be allowed/enforced if the adoptive family agrees than [sic] they should be required by law to let visitation happen."* Adoptees also noted the need for accessible support and services, particularly therapy and mental health services for children and adoptive parents. A few adoptees suggested the costs of these services should be covered for life. Additionally, adoptees emphasized the importance of accessing information such as medical history, birth family information, and birth certificates, and called for reforms to allow for easier access to these records. Many expressed frustrations with sealed records and missing pieces of their histories. Some adoptees also suggested measures like banning name changes, birth certificate alterations, and record sealing. Lastly, some adoptees shared the sentiment that the foster care system should be abolished or "overhauled," citing "brokenness" and harm to all involved.

Private Domestic Adoption

These questions were only asked of those who indicated that they were adopted through a private domestic adoption.

Factors in Choosing Adoptive Parents

Survey Question: Which of the following factors do you think are important for expectant/birth parents to consider when choosing the adoptive parents? (Please choose all that apply.)

Important Factors to Consider when Choosing Adoptive Parents (Select all that apply)	N = 563
Adoptive parents' age	42.6%
Adoptive parents' race	38.1%
Lack of/or number of children already in home	28.2%
Adoptive parents' views on openness in adoption	64.7%
Adoptive parents' political, social, and/or religious views	48.6%
Other	31.8%

Table 42. Adoptees' views of important factors when choosing parents (Private Domestic)

Age When Adoptees Knew They Were Adopted

Survey Question: At what age did you know you were adopted? Please choose the best fitting response.

	2000+	1990s	1980s	1970s	1960s	1950s and earlier	Total
Since very young	14 (87.5%)	62 (89.9%)	94 (90.4%)	101 (87.8%)	145 (90.6%)	90 (79.7%)	506
Elementary school	2 (12.5%)	7 (10.1%)	5 (4.8%)	10 (8.7%)	8 (5.0%)	14 (12.4%)	46
Middle or high school	0	0	3 (2.9%)	0	2 (1.3%)	4 (3.5%)	9
As an adult	0	0	2 (1.9%)	4 (3.5%)	5 (3.1%)	5 (4.4%)	16

Table 43. Age when adoptees knew they were adopted

Accessing Birth Records

Survey Question: In recent years, some states have changed their laws on adoptees accessing original birth records. Which of the following best describes your view on adoptees accessing original birth records?

Adoptees Accessing Birth Records	N = 576
No opinion	3.3%
Any promise made of confidentiality to birth parent should remain in place	7.3%
Adoptees entitled to full access of original birth records, regardless of what was previously told to birth parents	67.7%
Adoptees should only be allowed to access records if birth mother has explicitly given consent	12.5%
Other	9.2%

Table 44. Adoptees' views on access to original birth records

Intercountry Adoption

These questions were only asked of those who indicated that they were adopted through an intercountry adoption.

Connection to Birth Country's Culture

Survey Prompt: Please rate the extent to which you agree with the following.

N=445	Strongly disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree
Adoptive parents sought to celebrate, honor, and/or incorporate birth country's culture into my life	22.7%	12.6%	14.6%	25.8%	24.3%
I am proud to be from my country of origin	2.9%	4.3%	20.7%	29.7%	42.5%

Table 45. Adoptees' connection to birth country

The results for the question about celebrating birth culture was examined further by breaking responses down by time period of adoptive placement. There was a significant shift in perspectives based on time period of adoption. Adoptees with more recent adoptions had parents who were much more likely to celebrate, honor, and/or incorporate adoptees' birth culture.

	2000+ n= 161	1990s n=89	1980s n=82	1970s n=71	1960s n=27	1950s n=15	Total N=445
Strongly disagree	6.2%	20.2%	35.4%	38.0%	40.7%	40.0%	22.7%
Somewhat disagree	8.7%	11.2%	22.0%	12.7%	11.1%	13.3%	12.6%
Neither agree nor disagree	16.8%	9.0%	18.3%	11.3%	11.1%	26.7%	14.6%
Somewhat agree	33.5%	27.0%	14.6%	23.9%	18.5%	20.0%	25.8%
Strongly agree	34.8%	32.6%	9.8%	14.1%	18.5%	0.0%	24.3%

Table 46. Adoptive parents' celebration of culture by time period of adoption

Views on Intercountry Placements and Birth Country Travel

Survey Question: When family reunification and domestic adoption are not possible in a child's birth country, do you believe the United States should continue to allow intercountry placements?

Survey Question: Have you traveled back to your birth country as a teenager or adult?

For those that answered “yes” to having traveled to their birth country, they were asked:

Based on your experience, would you recommend a birth country trip to other intercountry adoptees?

The answers to these three questions are listed below.

N = 447	Yes	No	Other
When family reunification and domestic adoption are not possible in child's birth country, do you believe the United States should continue to allow intercountry adoption?	381 (86.4%)	60 (13.6%)	N/A
Have you traveled back to your birth country as a teenager or adult?	185 (41.5%)	261 (58.5%)	N/A
Based on your experience, would you recommend a birth country trip to other intercountry adoptees?	165 (89.2%)	1 (0.5%)	19 (10.3%)

Table 47. Adoptees' thoughts on other intercountry adoption issues

Most of the “Other” responses mentioned the personal nature of the decision, indicating that this decision should be decided on a case-by-case basis. Other examples include the following:

- “Yes, but with preparation and professional supports.”
- “Yes, but not through an adoption agency, one lead by other adoptees that is not for profit.”
- “It was not the life giving, sanctifying experience I had hoped it would be.”
- “Depends on the age of the person when they travel. I would not have gotten the same from the trip if I went when I was younger.”

Adoptee Perspectives

This analysis examines the experiences and perspectives of adoptees, aiming to offer a more comprehensive understanding of their experiences. Adoptees responded to two open-ended questions, offering advice for adoptive parents and reflections on what they wished their parents had done differently in discussing their adoption. This section discusses key themes that emerged from their insights.

Advice for Future Adoptive Parents

This section explores adoptees' advice for future adoptive parents, delving into three key themes as well as a few notable contradictions. Adoptees were asked to provide an open-ended response to the following question:

If you could give advice to future adoptive parents, what do you think is most important for them to know?

We received and analyzed 1,153 responses. Respondents highlighted the value of openness and belonging, detailed positive parenting qualities, and advocated for child-centered parenting. They also offered guidance on training, support, and resources that are most beneficial for adoptees and their families.

Theme One: Create an Environment of Openness and Belonging

Many adoptees stressed the value of establishing a sense of belonging and trust within the family relationship. Within this theme, various subthemes emerged, including open communication, honesty, avoidance of shame and secrecy, and openness in birth family relationships.

Open communication and information sharing – The importance of open and honest communication was the most widely shared advice from adoptees. They not only underscored the overarching significance of openness but also delved into specific crucial conversations, including discussing a child's adoption status and sharing their birth and adoption story. Many respondents also elaborated on the adverse effects of secrecy, shame, and information withholding within their families, explaining how such dynamics impacted trust and sense of identity. For instance, one adoptee wrote, *"I cannot emphasize this enough: DO NOT hide a child's adoption from them. My adoptive parents were transparent and open about it from day 1 and that has made a world's difference in my attitude about my adoption. Hiding it can severely hinder the family (both you and the child) in the long-term."*

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Adoptees recommended discussing adoption early and often, with many sharing that they could not recall the specific moment when they were informed they were adopted; rather they had “always known.” For many adoptees, engaging in early discussions about adoption contributed to normalizing their adoption status, strengthening feelings of belonging, and preventing feelings of disillusionment about their adoptive identity. Furthermore, adoptees stressed the significance of tailoring conversations to ensure they are age and developmentally-appropriate, particularly when addressing topics related to birth family.

Respondents emphasized the value of establishing a safe space for open communication. Many shared that their parents created environments where they always felt safe raising questions and expressing their feelings, recognizing the profound impact this had on their identity development. Conversely, some adoptees, despite being informed of their adoption at a young age, remained reticent about raising questions and expressed a desire for their parents to have fostered a similar environment. One adoptee expressed that *“assuming that [your child] will tell you when they are ready to learn about things is a slippery slope so being proactive in these conversations will help alleviate a lot of burden from the adoptees themselves.”* Generally, adoptees recommended that adoptive parents create an environment where children feel welcome to ask questions and process feelings at any time. For instance, one adoptee advised, *“Always keep the door open for discussion. Feelings can change. Even as an adult, difficult feelings can come up and need to be processed.”* They asked that parents also focus on listening to their child as they process these emotions.

Birth family openness – An additional subtheme of openness emerged concerning conversations about birth family and birth family contact. Adoptees revealed discomfort when broaching these topics with their adoptive families, with many expressing a desire for their parents to have initiated calm, positive, and ongoing conversations on the matter. It is noteworthy that while some adoptees suggested that adoptive parents should convey solely positive messaging, others shared that “sugar coating” birth family stories created unrealistic expectations, later leading to disappointment when faced with the realities of their birth family's situation. Many adoptees expressed a desire for more detailed information on their birth and birth family, indicating that if such information was unavailable, they wished their adoptive parents would have attempted to gather this for them.

Additionally, the issue of navigating birth family relationships held clear significance for adoptees. One respondent emphasized, *“If you are adopting then open adoption with visitation with birth parents and family is a must.”* Adoptees discussed the value of adoptive parents being encouraging and open to birth family relationships, highlighting instances where they felt unsupported and torn between their adoptive and birth families. Others described that maintaining connections with their birth family made them feel complete and connected to an essential aspect of their identity. Adoptees also acknowledged that every birth family situation is different, and some suggested that decisions regarding contact should be based

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on the child's comfort level and the safety dynamics with birth family members. While a large majority advocated for some degree of openness, a few expressed a preference for their parents to have completely severed birth family contact.

Belonging – In this study, adoptees reinforced their unique experiences with identity, attachment, and belonging. They consistently highlighted the importance of fostering a sense of belonging and normalizing a child's adoption. However, adoptees expressed varied perspectives on how much a child's adoptive identity should be emphasized. Some adoptees expressed appreciation to their parents for making them feel "special" or "chosen," while others advised against overly emphasizing a child's adoptive identity. Instead, they expressed the significance of being treated equally to non-adopted children. For instance, one adoptee advised *"Make sure the child never feels singled out... All adoptees want a sense of belonging. So don't talk about them or introduce them as your adopted child. They are simply your child."* Similar sentiments included: *"treat your adopted children as if they were your flesh & blood, because in choosing to adopt, you are making the choice to bring a child into your life as your own. Flesh & blood really doesn't and shouldn't mean anything different."* Conversely, many adoptees shared alternate opinions: *"Don't treat adoptees the same way as you treat your biological children, we are going through different things than they are. We feel different insecurities and need to be able to talk about them."*

While these perspectives appear to contradict, adoptees aligned in urging adoptive parents to help adopted children establish normalcy and belonging, and also recognize their unique needs. This includes suggestions for making adoptees feel equally welcomed, loved, and accepted, while regularly considering the impacts of adoption loss and trauma on their daily lives. They also stressed the importance of not expecting gratitude from adoptees for being adopted.

Furthermore, adoptees hold diverse views on whether adoptive families should celebrate adoption. While some appreciated such celebrations and shared that it made them feel cherished, others felt singled out by such experiences. (These contradictions will be further explored later in this analysis.)

Theme Two: Be Child-Centered

Being child-centered was an overarching theme highlighted in a variety of ways throughout adoptee responses. Many shared general parenting advice, like being loving, patient, supportive, committed, and attentive to children. Others advised that parents recognize that adoptive parents can often be centered in the adoption process and actively strive to de-center themselves, with some stating, *“This is not about you, this is about the child.”* Overall, adoptees conveyed that future adoptive parents should be dedicated to understanding and prioritizing their child’s unique needs.

Positive parenting qualities – Within this subtheme, adoptees expressed that future adoptive parents should strive to be loving and supportive of their children. A few detailed feelings of distance and insecurity in their relationship with their parents, noting this was a result of their adoption status. Adoptees also discussed the importance of patience and commitment, specifically highlighting adoptees’ unique and often additional needs which sometimes require special care and consideration. One adoptee wrote, *“Meet your child where they’re at, have patience. Adoption usually has big changes and institutional care can cause delays. So just let your child be where they are and grow at their own pace, acceptance is most important.”* Respondents also highlighted the importance of attentiveness to an adopted child’s physical, emotional, and mental health, again reiterating how their unique experiences of separation and loss increase this importance. They emphasized that adoptive families must demonstrate attentiveness, support, patience, commitment, and love to effectively support adoptees and navigate possible complexities.

Let the child lead – Adoptees offered a range of perspectives on several adoption-related issues, including the degree of openness with birth family, immersion in birth culture, and participation in adoptee groups and other services. Despite these differing views, a common theme emerged: let the child lead. Regardless of the chosen path, adoptees most appreciated when they were provided with consistent opportunities and support to participate, and then given the freedom to engage at their own pace. For instance, while many adoptees articulated the value of engaging with their birth culture and its positive impact on identity formation, others shared resistance or disinterest in such activities during childhood. One adoptee remarked, *“My parents tried to have me do culture classes when I was younger. I wasn’t very interested in it, and we didn’t do that many classes after that. Letting your kid decide if they want to try to bring their own culture in or not is important.”* Recognizing each adoptee’s individual needs and preferences, adoptees encouraged future adoptive parents to provide children with opportunities to engage with the adoptee community, birth culture, and birth family at their own pace.

Adoptees also highlighted the importance of allowing them to be themselves. Some expressed feeling burdened by their parents’ expectations and family aspirations, and others

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felt pressure to participate in cultural or religious practices that did not resonate with them. One adoptee advised, *“Treat the child as their own individual. Not some fulfillment to their idea of having kids.”* Adoptees asked future adoptive parents to set aside their expectations and instead give adoptees opportunities to pursue their individual interests and passions.

Theme Three: Access Appropriate Education, Supports, and Resources

This final theme features adoptee recommendations for additional education, training, supports, and services for adoptive parents. Throughout this study, adoptees frequently stressed the importance of adoptive parents receiving increased training and education before, during, and after adoption. They also noted the need for adoptive family engagement in supportive services. Commonly recommended topics include trauma, cultural competency, therapeutic interventions, and support groups.

Setting expectations and understanding adoption – Many adoptees centered their responses on setting realistic expectations for adoptive parents, highlighting its profound impact on their family dynamics and upbringing. They shared that their parents were often unprepared for the realities and complexities of adoptive parenting, leading to challenges following the placement. One adoptee advised adoptive parents to *“Understand that adoption can be complex, and it’ll take a lot of education and stepping out of their comfort zone. It’s not as easy as ‘you can JUST adopt’”*. Another described adoption as a journey encompassing both beauty and hardship, remarking, *“It’s a unique, challenging, fulfilling, and beautiful way to grow a family.”*

Adoptees also emphasized the distinctions between parenting by birth and adoption, again striving to prepare prospective parents for the unique complexities that adoption can hold. One prevalent difference shared is that adoption invariably involves elements of separation, grief, loss, and trauma. While all parents must be attentive to their children’s mental health, behaviors, attachment, and identity, adoptees’ backgrounds of separation and loss create a slightly more complex dynamic that can require additional attention. As one adoptee explains, *“[adoptees] can experience special circumstances needing to be overcome like loss, grief, identity development, self-esteem, lack of information about medical background (including mental health and addiction predispositions). And we can face special challenges in the development of identity.”* Many adoptees expressed the importance for adoptive parents to acknowledge this and be attuned to their child’s mental health needs. This advice also aligns with other recommendations for adoptive parents to undergo more comprehensive training on topics like trauma-informed parenting and mental health. Many adoptees also recounted childhood examples of behavioral challenges, difficulties bonding with adoptive parents, and challenges developing a secure sense of identity and belonging. Other differences such as genetic history, limited medical information, and physical differences from the adoptive family were also mentioned.

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Moreover, adoptees consistently emphasized the significance of birth family connections in an adoptee's life. Some focused on setting expectations for adoptive parents by urging them to acknowledge that their child has another family, too. A large majority also felt that open adoption should be prioritized and valued. They advised adoptive parents to expect that all adoptees will be interested in knowing their family history as well as searching for or contacting birth families. Adoptees urged adoptive parents not to take these interests in the birth family personally, as it is a natural aspect of the adoptee experience and does not diminish a child's love for their adoptive parents. One respondent advised, *"An adopted child can love you but still want to know their biology and history. It's not either/or. More like both/and. They need to always know their story."* Another adoptee also shared, *"Your child's biological background and relationships are an important part of who they are and can be a gaping hole if missing. That hole cannot be filled with any substitute, and is in no way, shape or form a reflection of your parenting or any perceived shortcomings. That hole has absolutely nothing to do with you and cannot be fixed by you. All you can do is be supportive and loving about it. I was in a closed adoption and feel a somewhat open adoption would have been better for me as that unknown was always a huge part of my being. Now I am in contact with all of my biological family, and I feel whole. My adoptive family is still my family and for me nothing has changed there."* Adoptees also strived to normalize missing birth family and experiencing grief over the loss of those relationships. It is important to understand that grief pertaining to the birth family is not something that can be controlled or fixed, but rather, adoptive parents should strive to be supportive and create a safe space for adoptees to process these emotions.

Adoptees also discussed common motivations for adopting, such as infertility, family building, and helping a child. In discussing these motives, adoptees shared their views on which motives were "acceptable." While some of their views were contradictory, they generally emphasized the importance of being child-centered. Many adoptees shared the belief that their parents could have benefitted from processing their motivations and emotions before pursuing adoption. This aligns with another recurring theme of advising adoptive parents to engage with services and interventions to address personal grief and trauma before adopting. Adoptees also offered insights on the appropriate role of adoptive parents, advising them to reject the mindset of being entitled to or "saviors" of a child, but rather recognize that they are fulfilling their desire to parent. They also highlighted that adoptive parents should not attempt to "replace birth family" and should instead leave room for a both/and mindset.

Training - Throughout their reflections, many adoptees acknowledged that adoptive parents did their best with the information available at the time, but also emphasized the considerable benefits of additional training and education. The most commonly cited training topics were cultural competency, trauma, trauma-informed parenting, and mental health awareness.

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One of the most prevalent suggestions for future adoptive parents was to learn about and integrate their child's culture. These suggestions encompassed a wide range of advice, from navigating conversations about race, to visiting their birth country, to learning from other adoptees. Adoptees asked parents to *"incorporate your child's culture into your everyday life,"* and offered examples like actively seeking out resources, engaging in cultural events, and building connections within the child's cultural community. One adoptee stressed the need for adoptive parents to *"do everything in their power to accommodate their adopted children's race, including raising them in a racially diverse environment and deepening their own understanding of racial experiences in America, not just cultural knowledge of the birth country."* Another emphasized, *"I think it is important for adoptive parents to understand the need to assimilate into their child's culture and world instead of trying to blend their child seamlessly into their culture."* Adoptees highlighted how acknowledging and celebrating their cultural heritage helped them cultivate a deeper understanding of their identity and appreciation for their background. They also highlighted the importance of cultural competency training to equip adoptive parents with the skills to effectively navigate conversations about race and culture.

Adoptees also emphasized the unique value added from learning from other adoptees. For instance, one shared, *"Listen to adoptee educators and advocates and [learn about] the risks and struggles adoptees face so you can be a true support in our mental health, racial identity and quality of life."* It was also recommended that adoptive parents learn from adoptees who hold diverse views of adoption, both positive and negative, to offer a wider lens.

Supports and services – Adoptees recommended a range of supportive services for both adoptive parents and adoptees. The most frequently suggested service was therapy; while some advocated for family therapy, others highlighted the importance of individual counseling for both adoptees and adoptive parents. In addition to learning from adoptees, it was recommended that adoptive parents provide opportunities for their children to engage with the adoptee community. They discussed the value of cultivating a strong support system and participating in both adoptee and adoptive parent support groups, as well as connecting with a child's racial and cultural community. One adoptee wrote, *"Be in community with other adoptees and if possible, people from the adoptees' birth culture in the case of interracial or international adoption."* Many adoptees also reiterated the significance of selecting providers that are trauma-informed and adoption-competent, ensuring they understand adoption's unique dynamics.

As previously mentioned, adoptees noted the need for adoptive parents to prioritize their own personal growth and seek supportive services to address their own emotional needs. One adoptee explained, *"[It is] very important to seek counseling, not only for the process with the child, but for yourselves so you have a safe place to process all the emotions, changes and life experiences adoption brings. So that you as an adoptive parent don't project your struggles onto the*

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child and you can remain present and engaged with the child, so they always feel safe, loved, and included.” Many urged adoptive parents to *“heal yourself first,”* noting that unresolved personal issues can create a stressful and complex emotional environment for adoptees and can negatively impact family dynamics, *“Adoptees are prone to taking all that on,”* one respondent shared. Many specifically stressed that those experiencing infertility should make a significant commitment to processing their grief before deciding to pursue adoption. They emphasized that adoptive parents should understand that adoption does not resolve grief related to infertility.

Contrasting Views

Throughout this survey, adoptees articulated specific recommendations regarding how future adoptive parents should handle a variety of common adoption issues. Since adoptees are a diverse group, it should be no surprise that they have diverse views. While it was clear that many adoptees perceived their feedback to be the one “right” answer, our analysis revealed that contrasting advice was often provided on certain topics. These contradictions shed light on a fundamental reality in adoption: many important adoption issues lack a universal solution. This section explores a few notable contradictions identified during our analysis.

Do not adopt

While most adoptees offered advice for improving the adoption experience, some advised adoptive parents against pursuing adoption altogether. Some respondents believe adoption means participating in a problematic system, referencing issues like birth parent coercion. These adoptees urged adoptive parents to pursue alternatives to private domestic adoption specifically, offering options like guardianship, fostering, adopting from foster care, and supporting family preservation. Others requested that adoptive parents seek out “ethical adoptions.” Although the definition of this varied amongst respondents, many highlighted preventing birth parent coercion and honoring contact agreements.

“Chosen”

Within the theme of open communication, many adoptees detailed specific phrases and labels used by their family, which elicited both positive and negative reactions. One recurring topic was using terms such as “special” or “chosen” when describing an adoptee. Many adoptees expressed that this sentiment made them feel happy, special, and strengthened their sense of belonging, while others felt “othered” or that this implied an obligation to be grateful for their adoption. For instance, one adoptee shared, *“We’ll figure out eventually that we weren’t chosen. We were what was available when you got to the front of the line. It also leaves us feeling that we have to live up to whatever it was that we were chosen for. It’s best not to use the word ‘chosen.’ It’s okay to tell us we were wanted.”*

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Adoption and birth story

Adoptees also provided contrasting views regarding discussing their birth story. Here are two examples:

“Don’t tell your child they are lucky. Don’t tell them that their parents loved them so they gave them away. Imagine if your parents did this: how would you feel? That fairytale narrative is a lie. Adoption is complex. Find developmentally appropriate ways to address this. Better yet, if you have a closed adoption, find your child’s birth family right away.”

“Always frame adoption and birth parents in a positive light. Such as ‘She loved you so much that she made sure you would be raised in the best possible environment. Her decision is a reflection of how deeply she loved you, and it was very brave of her.’”

Celebrating adoption

There were also different views expressed when it comes to celebrating adoption. Four different examples of adoptees’ views on celebrating adoption are provided here.

“I HATE when I see people I know that have adopted Happy Gotcha day it sounds like they adopted a dog. I think the kids will hate it when they get older... No one wants to feel different.”

“My family made our gotcha day a special day for us. Wishing us a happy gotcha day, letting us choose the dinner we ate that night, and just made it a happy occasion and made it about us, I feel like that really helped me feel accepted and loved.”

“I’m glad my parents didn’t celebrate gotcha day or whatever - I was their child - birthdays were enough just like the rest of my siblings. I didn’t need extra attention because my mother didn’t give birth to me”

“The day we were placed with them and the day the adoption was finalized are joyful for them. Those days may not be joyful for us.”

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Motivations to adopt

Different adoptees offered varied opinions on what should motivate adoptive parents to pursue adoption. Five adoptees' views are provided here:

"Adoption is a way to provide for a child who would otherwise have nobody to provide for them. It is not a way to solve your infertility and build your family."

"Adopt a child [because] you [want to] help, not to fill a void"

"If you want to adopt because you want a baby and can't make your own someone else's baby isn't going to fix that. Adoption isn't for you."

"Why are you adopting? Is it to fulfill something in you? If so, don't adopt. Do you think you are rescuing/saving a child? If so, don't adopt. There are very [few] cases that I think adoption should happen - this includes abuse of child or drug abuse by parents."

"Choose to adopt because it is your dream to grow your family and share your life by welcoming a child into your heart and home, just as you would with a child who was born to you. If you hope to "give a child a better life" or "save a child," adoption is NOT the right choice for you."

What Adoptees Wish Their Parents Had Done Differently

This section explores adoptees' reflections and preferences on how their adoptive parents handled conversations about adoption. They were asked:

What, if anything, do you wish your adoptive parents had done differently related to discussing your adoption with you?

There were 1,122 responses to this question, from which three prominent themes emerged. Adoptees provided insights into communication strategies and offered feedback on addressing crucial adoption-related topics like trauma, race, and birth family. Additionally, a substantial number of adoptees expressed appreciation for the way their parents navigated these conversations and expressed having no additional feedback.

Theme One: Communication and Messaging

A majority of adoptees expressed desires for enhancing parent-child communication when it came to discussing adoption. Key feedback highlighted the necessity of open and honest dialogue, continuously initiating discussions from an early age, and providing comprehensive information. Adoptees also discussed the importance of creating a safe space for children to process their emotions and offered guidance on appropriate messaging. Adoptees expressed additional desires for their parents to have acknowledged trauma, discussed issues related to race, and supported their preferences regarding birth family search and contact.

Open communication and information sharing – Consistent with the advice offered in the previous section, adoptees emphasized a desire for their adoptions to have been discussed openly, often, and early in life. They shared the adverse impacts of being raised in environments that lacked open communication, including internalized feelings of shame, stress, and guilt related to their adoption status. As one adoptee expressed, *“By not talking about adoption, they made my entire identity, to some degree, taboo.”* Many also shared a desire for their parents to be more receptive to answering their questions about their adoption and birth family, some even described being met with frustration when raising difficult questions. Another shared, *“I wish they allowed us to ask questions and build a positive adoptive identity as opposed to being pushed to feel shame for being adopted.”*

Adoptees also expressed wishes for their adoptive parents to have avoided secrecy and withholding information about their adoption and birth family story. One of the most common themes was a desire for adoptive families to have provided more birth family information. While some adoptees noted that this information was often not readily available, they wished their parents had searched for more information or supported them in their search. Some adoptees who were adopted many decades ago also shared that their parents followed what is now outdated advice to limit information or share falsified stories to protect children from more complex issues. A few adoptees even reported that adoption was never discussed in their household, sharing that they became aware of their adoption status late into adulthood, often by accident or after their parents passed away.

Moreover, adoptees valued being told about their adoption at a younger age. Some recounted experiences of being informed later in life and shared how it was challenging to reconcile these new aspects of their identity. Other adoptees also lamented that valuable birth family information was shared too late, with a few recalling that their birth parents had died by the time they received enough information to contact them. One adoptee shared, *“My adoptive mother did not share my adoption documentation with me until I was 18, after which point I initiated a birth family search and learned that my birth mother was deceased. Waiting to share my documentation took away any chance I had at meeting my birth mother.”*

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Other adoptees believe that their parents discussed their adoption too infrequently, noting their desire for more consistent and ongoing dialogue. They expressed that ongoing conversations and periodic check-ins would have provided more space for them to explore their evolving questions and emotions throughout their development. One adoptee explained *“That’s more than bringing it up once or twice. That’s more than asking me if I have any questions and assuming the matter is settled if I don’t express any.”* Adoptees further emphasized the significance of creating a family environment where children feel safe and comfortable exploring feelings and raising questions, rather than expecting adoptees to “just be grateful.” Many shared that despite having a relatively open conversation with their parents, they still felt nervousness and discomfort raising questions. One adoptee shared, *“I wish they had been more open to talking about my feelings surrounding adoption, and that they would have initiated conversations. It always felt like such a taboo subject (especially as a child in the 1980s). I never told them when kids said mean things because I was worried that talking about being adopted would make them feel uncomfortable.”*

Furthermore, many adoptees recounted instances of parental defensiveness or fragility regarding their adoption or birth family, which contributed to feelings of split loyalty, insecurity, guilt, and shame. Some described their parents as visibly distressed, irritable, or even abusive when the topic of their adoption was raised. For instance, one adoptee recalled that *“One parent allowed their own insecurities to get the best of them by always becoming emotional and sometimes defensive on the rare occasion I had questions and wanted to discuss my adoption... one parent’s reaction always caused me guilt for asking because it was clear my questions were difficult and upsetting for them because (in their mind) any discussion challenged the notion of them being my ‘real’ parent. They allowed their own fragility to get in the way of them fully supporting me.”* Many reiterated that these emotional reactions impeded their ability to explore their identity and birth family relationships, leading some to do so in secret or wait until their adoptive parents had passed away. Another adoptee shared, *“I wish they had given me room to feel all the complicated feelings I did and still do about my adoption. I wish they had not made it my responsibility to keep quiet, so they didn’t have to face the reality of choices they were instrumental in making, choices which then altered the course of my life forever. I wish they could have understood that me having care for or even just curiosity about my biological family was not a threat to my feelings toward them, that I can hold love toward my birth family as well as love toward them. I wish they had not spent all my life feeling in competition with my biological family, always on the defensive and jumping to prove themselves as my only ‘real’ parents. I wish they had listened to how I felt and taken responsibility for their part in the harms I endured as a result of being adopted and then being silenced, unable to express or even process how I felt about being adopted until I reached adulthood.”* Adoptees also acknowledged the emotional complexity of these issues for adoptive parents and reiterated the importance of parents to access supportive services to process emotions before adopting. Additionally, respondents emphasized the

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need for these conversations to be child-centered, ensuring that the child's needs and emotions are prioritized.

Important messaging – When it comes to discussing adoption and birth family, adoptees offered important guidance to parents on appropriate messaging. Adoptees valued when their parents conducted conversations calmly and respectfully, and when they emphasized love and belonging. They expressed feeling hurt when their parents expressed negative views of their birth family or conveyed false narratives about the reasons for their adoption placement. Adoptees offered diverse perspectives on whether parents should solely convey positive messaging or provide more nuanced and accurate information, even when that may entail more challenging details. While some respondents were glad their parents shielded them from such complexities, others felt this approach was overly positive and “sugarcoated” important information. Similar to the previous section on advice for adoptive parents, many expressed varied sentiments about language such as being “chosen.” Some found this messaging affirming and reassuring, for example, “[They] showed so much love for me that I always felt very special and unique in that I was ‘chosen’.” Others viewed this negatively; for example, one adoptee wrote, “My parents would frequently read ‘The Chosen Child’ book to me as a child. They were well-intentioned and it did help me understand adoption a bit more. Unfortunately, it also made me feel like I was put on this pedestal and had to be perfect because I was ‘chosen.’ I wish that they had known the negative impact that messaging had and how it would shape my need for perfectionism.”

Acknowledging trauma and race – Many adoptees believe their parents missed the mark in addressing that adoption involves separation, loss, and trauma. They often recounted that loss and trauma were simply not discussed within their household and described a lack of acknowledgement of these issues from their adoptive parents. Adoptees believe they would have benefitted from their parents understanding this context and preparing them for how this may impact their lives.

Additionally, adoptees discussed the importance of addressing the complexities of adopting a child of a different race or culture. Many stated issues of race were inadequately addressed, referencing family mindsets of colorblindness. One adoptee recalled, “They just acted like I was their biological child. I am Native American. I wish they would have done anything more than the nothing they did to raise me with some of my tribal traditions. They could have taken me back to my tribe to go to pow wow, heritage lessons, language lessons, etc. But they did not see the value in helping me understand who I was.” Adoptees advised parents to facilitate discussions with their children about stigma and racism. They also shared desires for their race and culture to have been more integrated into their family lives, describing an interest in having regular opportunities for engaging with their cultural heritage and community.

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Supporting birth family search and contact – Adoptees also wished their parents had been open to and supportive of their preferences regarding birth family search and contact. One adoptee recounted, *“I wish they didn't always tell me they would help me find my family to only become angry when I did and unsupportive through the process.”* Another adoptee shared, *“They never kept anything secret about my adoption but I wish they'd been more vocally supportive of me searching for my birth family from an early age. I was under the impression for many years that it wasn't approved and unfortunately, it hindered me searching.”* While a large majority of adoptees wished for increased openness, a few mentioned they wished for less birth family contact.

Theme Two: Accessing Support

Many respondents expressed a desire for enhanced adoptive parent training and support, recognizing their parents' lack of education on handling adoption and birth family discussions. They identified key competencies as well as preferred services and supports to best equip adoptive parents with the knowledge and skills to navigate these conversations effectively.

Increased competency – Adoptees expressed the belief that their parents would have better-navigated adoption and birth family discussions if they had received more guidance and training on these issues. Many discussed the need for enhanced parental competency on topics like trauma-informed parenting and mental health training, as well as cultural competency. One adoptee wrote, *“I wish they understood the trauma of adoption and how to help us with it.”* Another respondent shared, *“The system and practices of adoption at the time of my adoption did nothing to prepare my parents about parenting an adoptee, an adoptee of color, a woman of color, a person who experienced pre-verbal trauma, how to negotiate the existence of my birth family and not having access to them, cultural and ethnic competency, etc...”* This section intersects with the following theme, as many adoptees expressed that their adoptive parents “did the best they could” and instead looked to agencies and professionals to have better prepared them.

Accessed services and supports – Many adoptees emphasized the importance of engaging with therapy services, for both adoptees and adoptive parents. It was reiterated that adoptive parents should seek counseling pre-adoption, specifically underscoring the need for them to process grief related to infertility. Adoptees also wished for more opportunities to engage with the adoptee community, and transracial adoptees specifically wished to connect with their racial and cultural communities. Some respondents described being resistant to these opportunities as children, but now wish their adoptive parents had encouraged them more.

Theme Three: Parents Did Well

Interestingly, a significant number of respondents noted that they did not have feedback on this question. These adoptees expressed that their parents handled their adoption discussions well and had no desire for change. Many also provided specific details on what they felt their parents did well, offering themes that aligned with the suggestions for improvement discussed above. One adoptee shared: *“For the period in which I was adopted, my parents were open and honest from day [one]. They had very little information regarding my biological parents but shared what they had. They have also always been supportive of me searching for and finding my birth mother. So no, I do not wish that they had done anything differently.”* Many adoptees expressed that their parents did a great job of normalizing their adoption, creating a sense of belonging, making them feel special and well supported. Others appreciated their parents’ openness, honesty, and willingness to answer all questions about their adoption and birth family. Adoptees also highlighted that their parents supported their preferences regarding birth family contact, with some adoptees illustrating very open relationships and others describing very limited contact. A few adoptees also noted that their parents effectively integrated their culture and heritage.

Many responses featured a noteworthy qualifier: adoptees often stated that their adoptive parents did well “with the resources they had available.” This suggests that while adoptees believe their parents did fine given their circumstances, they see how additional support and resources would have been beneficial. Consequently, many adoptees in this theme still identified a need, they simply do not place blame or responsibility on their adoptive parents. Instead, adoptees pointed to ineffective information and resources available at the time, or a lack of adequate agency training and support.

Future Research

This is the third and final part of National Council For Adoption's *Profiles in Adoption* research series. This research has studied each member of the adoption triad; the first part focused on adoptive parents, and the second part surveyed birth parents. Some other perspectives and views were not a part of this research series, but their experiences and perceptions are nonetheless important. This includes hearing from those who spent much of their childhood outside parental care but were not adopted, for example, foster and kinship care. Other valuable perspectives include other members of the adoption constellation like adoptive siblings and adoption professionals. Hearing from these groups would further enhance our understanding of adoption and adoption-related issues.

These research findings raise additional questions that can be built upon with future research. Why are there differences in adoption satisfaction and life satisfaction for adoptees whose parents are of a different race? Are there practices that adoptive parents or adoption professionals can utilize to improve adoptee outcomes?

Limitations

In this survey, some questions prompted adoptees to recall past experiences; the accuracy of such recall impacts the validity of the findings presented in this report. Additionally, this survey utilized purposive sampling to obtain a relatively large sample of adoptee respondents. However, due to the non-random nature of such sampling, respondents who chose to participate may be different than the larger population of adult adoptees (i.e., self-selection bias). It may be that those who have strongly held views (e.g., in support of or opposed to adoption) may be overrepresented in this study.

Institutional Review Board (IRB)

This research was conducted based on an Exempt Review per Baylor University IRB.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Conclusion

While this report covers a wide array of issues related to adoptees, there were more questions *not* asked than asked. From the information we gathered, the authors hope that this report can be used by members of the adoption community to increase understanding and to promote improved practices and policies.

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About National Council For Adoption

Founded in 1980, National Council For Adoption (NCFA) is a leading authoritative voice for adoption and is passionately committed to the belief that every child deserves to thrive in a nurturing permanent family. NCFA's nonprofit work promotes a culture of adoption through education, research, advocacy, and collaboration that aims to serve children, expectant parents, birth parents, adopted individuals, adoptive families, and adoption professionals. For more information, please visit www.adoptioncouncil.org



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