

# Adoption Advocate



## Beyond the Immediate Family: Engaging Family and Friends In the Adoption Journey

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## Introduction

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Adoption can be a complex subject to discuss for a variety of reasons. Every adoption begins with loss and brings lasting, transformative changes to family dynamics, which makes it a naturally sensitive topic. Additionally, with only 7% of Americans having adopted, it remains a relatively uncommon form of family building, which means the general population is often less knowledgeable about it.<sup>1</sup> As a result, when a family adopts, extended relatives, friends, and members of the broader community may be unsure of how to offer meaningful support.

In addition, questions about the process are likely to arise from friends and family who are less familiar with adoption. Many adoptive parents have experiences where friends or family ask questions or raise topics that feel

uncomfortable, confusing, or even hurtful or offensive. Navigating these sensitive topics with our loved ones—and even with our children—can be challenging and requires thoughtful preparation.

This article explores how to prepare, include, and guide extended family and friends in the adoption journey. It will offer strategies to navigate difficult or intrusive conversations, educate others about adoption, and find supportive and meaningful ways to engage loved ones in the adoption experience.

## Open Communication

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Open communication about adoption with an adoptive family's relational network is not merely an exchange of facts; it includes

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<sup>1</sup> The Harris Poll. (2022, February). 2022 US adoption attitudes survey. Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption. <https://www.davethomasfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/2022-US-Adoption-and-Foster-Care-Attitudes-Report-WEB-Final.pdf>

## *Open communication about adoption with extended family members and friends also creates a safe environment for a child to grow up in an adoption-informed community.*

sharing and acknowledging feelings about the topic. Open communication creates emotional safety for all parties to express both negative and positive emotions. It is non-judgmental and involves just as much listening as it does speaking. When prospective adoptive parents practice this with each other and their extended families before their child comes home, it becomes easier for them to exercise open communication with their child once they are living in the home. Open communication does not always necessitate agreement, but it provides a foundation to build upon for later discussions. Addressing challenging or “scary” topics early on can help prevent barriers to communication in the future.

Open communication starts at home; if adoptive parents are uncomfortable talking with their children about adoption, they will certainly feel uncomfortable talking about it with anyone else. Children take cues from their parents about what is acceptable or unacceptable. When parents avoid the topic of adoption, they may inadvertently plant shame into their child’s mind or send unintended messages regarding their child’s origin. For example, a child may feel responsible for their placement or believe there is something wrong with them that caused the adoption. Embracing adoption as an everyday topic and discussing it openly can normalize the child’s

story. This can be foundational to a child’s identity formation, may prevent feelings of abandonment, and can be healing for both birth and adoptive parents as well. Open communication about adoption with extended family members and friends also creates a safe environment for a child to grow up in an adoption-informed community.

## **Barriers to Open Communication**

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Establishing open communication within the adoptive home lays the foundation for extending that same openness to relationships outside the home. When adoptive parents are comfortable navigating adoption-related conversations with one another and their child, they are more prepared to model and initiate similar discussions with extended family, friends, and community members. This consistency fosters a supportive environment in which the child’s identity is affirmed not only at home but also in the broader circles that shape their life.

Some parents worry that discussing adoption too often might confuse their child or reinforce feelings of difference or loss. Others may be unsure how to address the topic, especially if they experienced infertility or grief on the path to adoption. These feelings are valid, but they should not become barriers to open dialogue both with the child and their community at large.

Avoiding conversations about adoption can have long-term consequences. Children need to understand their story in age-appropriate ways, and withholding information about their adoption can lead to confusion or a lack of trust. Conversely, openness encourages connection between adoptive parents and

their children and helps children make sense of their experiences over time.

It is also essential for adoptive parents to work through their feelings before bringing a child into their home. Misconceptions, unresolved grief, or the belief that adoption is a second-best option or replacement for a biological child can negatively impact their relationship with their child. Preparing emotionally and seeking guidance from adoption professionals can promote healthier family dynamics from the start.

## Tips for Talking to Friends and Family

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### Discuss adoption from the beginning:

To ensure open communication flows naturally, it must begin from the onset of adoption consideration. This means it starts with prospective parents who are *setting out* to adopt, not only with parents who have successfully completed an adoption process. Understandably, not everyone feels comfortable bringing their extended families into the conversation this early on. However, pre-adoptive parents should honestly consider why they feel reluctant. *Does this hesitation come from a desire to discuss the topic in a planned time and space, or does it stem from a fear of disapproval?* Talking about adoption early and often can normalize it for less-experienced friends and family members, while also serving as preparation for later discussions with the child.

### Normalize adoption as an everyday topic:

Adoption should be a household word, not a special occasion topic or something that is shared once and then forgotten. When adoption and birth families are discussed as a normal part of life, it becomes easier for children to embrace their story and for those around them to feel comfortable asking thoughtful questions. Normalize adoption through books, movies, family conversations, and by modeling respectful language. This helps prevent feelings of secrecy or shame.

### Include the child in age-appropriate ways:

When talking to family members about adoption, parents should remember to involve their child in the conversation, especially as they grow. Children learn how to talk about their story by watching and listening to how their parents do it. Including the child reinforces that their story is important and helps them feel empowered to talk about it—or not—on their terms.

### Prepare for the child's unique needs and the siblings' role:

Adoptive parents should specifically discuss known behavioral, medical, or special needs with their family and friends. While it is not necessary to reveal all aspects of a child's pre-adoption experiences or diagnoses, parents can thoughtfully share how these needs influence the way they will parent and make any household accommodations. This may include educating their support network on trauma-based behaviors or the specifics of certain medical or developmental needs. Parents can also inform their community of specific ways the family could be supported throughout the adoption journey, and how to be considerate of a child's history of trauma, separation, and loss. Equally as important is the preparation of siblings to welcome a

new child into the home. Siblings should be included in developmentally-appropriate conversations about the adoptee's needs and helped to understand how family dynamics might change when a new child is welcomed into the home.

### **Introduce and encourage adoption-sensitive language:**

Parents can help family and friends learn accurate adoption terminology so they can avoid inadvertently using terms that may be hurtful or outdated. Instead of saying “real parent” or “natural parent,” consider saying “birth parent” or “first parent.” Rather than “put up for adoption” or “gave up for adoption,” suggest alternatives such as “placed for adoption” or “made an adoption plan.” When describing a parent's decision not to place for adoption, instead of “keeping a child,” encourage using language such as “choosing to parent a child.”

### **Prepare for intrusive questions:**

Even well-meaning people may ask personal or inappropriate questions. Adoptive parents can prepare by thinking through common questions in advance and deciding together how to respond. The goal is to protect the child's privacy while educating others when possible. This is especially helpful when extended family gatherings or community events are coming up. The following section offers more detail on common questions and methods for navigating—and preparing your child to navigate—intrusive adoption questions.

### **Thoughtfully protect the child's private story:**

Not all details need to be shared. Children have a right to privacy, and some elements of their

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story should be theirs alone to share when they are ready. Remember that all adoption begins with loss, which is painful. The details of why a child was not able to be parented by their biological family may be too sensitive to discuss. Possibly the child's conception story, the birth parents' relationships with extended family, or their life circumstances may need to be carefully considered before sharing with others. Determine what feels appropriate to share and rehearse ways to redirect questions that cross the line. Extended family members should be made aware of these boundaries and encouraged to respect them.

### **Make decisions as a family about how to talk about adoption:**

Adoptive families should openly discuss how to talk to close family members and friends about birth parents, especially in preparation for a holiday or a family gathering. How can the family be unified in their views of and discussions about birth parents? What names should they use in describing their child's birth mother? What is the family's preference on how they want extended family and friends to refer to their child's birth parents? Honest and open communication is important in navigating these conversations sensitively.

### **Speak positively about the adoption journey:**

The way parents talk about adoption helps shape how the child and others see it. Parents should highlight the aspects of the decision that were filled with hope, excitement, and love. For example, parents should help their child understand, at an age-appropriate time, that while a history of infertility might be a part of their story, adoption was not an inferior way to build their family. While it is important to speak positively about the adoptive family's decision to adopt, it is equally important to approach the child's adoption and birth story neutrally and honestly. Parents should avoid sugar-coating difficult parts of their history or passing judgment on the child's birth family or pre-adoption experiences. Framing adoption as an intentional and fulfilling path to parenthood, while also maintaining the integrity of the child's story, gives the child language to share their life experiences with friends and family.

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## Managing Intrusive Questions

Adoptive parents often encounter well-meaning but intrusive questions such as:

- “Don’t you want children of your own?”
- “How much did your adoption cost?”
- “Why is adopting so complicated?”

These questions can feel personal or inappropriate, but they also offer a chance to educate others about adoption gently. In these moments, we want to empower the entire adoption triad—adoptees, birth parents, and adoptive parents—to choose whether to share any part of their story. Intrusive questions can provide amazing opportunities to inform family and friends about adoption-sensitive language.

Many times, people ask intrusive questions right in front of the child! Parents should keep in mind that these questions are learning opportunities not only for the inquirer but also to set an example for the child. Having clear, respectful responses ready can help adoptive parents protect their child's story while setting healthy boundaries. A thoughtful response can help

shape their child's views about their own adoption story and model for adoptees how to think and speak about themselves in a healthy and uplifting way. Our children take their cues from us about how to feel about themselves. A parent who responds to intrusive questions in kindness and truth puts tools in the child's toolbelt for how to speak about adoption when they are on their own. Parents should aim to consistently communicate to all listeners that adoption is both a unique and permanent way in which families are built. For example, a child who hears his mother say to a stranger that she is his “real mom” while also expressing gratitude for his birth mother communicates both that he was not born to his mother and also that his place in the family is secure.

The **W.I.S.E. Up!**<sup>®</sup> program is one useful tool for navigating these situations.<sup>2</sup> It empowers children and adults in the adoption triad with four response strategies:

- **W:** Walk away or ignore what was said or heard
- **I:** It's private, and I don't have to answer it
- **S:** Share something about my adoption story
- **E:** Educate others about adoption in general

Parents can practice these techniques with their partner, their children, and those in their support network. This tool is most effective when parents first model it for their children when responding to intrusive questions themselves. By modeling these skills in real-life situations, parents can equip their children with the tools needed to strategically share their story with friends, family, and others who are curious. This not only equips children with tools to manage future conversations but also reinforces the idea that their story belongs to them and is theirs to share.

Another meaningful way adoptive parents can support their child is by guiding friends and family in using respectful, adoption-appropriate language. Adoptive parents may choose to explain that phrases such as “put up for adoption” (a term which dates to the orphan train era), can be replaced with more thoughtful alternatives like “made an adoption plan.” Similarly, using terms like “birth parents” instead of “real parents” acknowledges all the roles involved in the adoption triad without undermining the

adoptive family. These intentional language shifts can contribute to a more inclusive, respectful, and affirming environment for the child.

## Involving Friends and Family in the Journey

Involving family members and friends in the adoption process and the child's homecoming can be tricky, but it is no less important for everyone involved. Loved ones may report feeling disconnected from the onset of the adoption process and even carry fears that the child will not form an attachment to them. Taking simple steps to include extended family members and friends along the way can diminish concerns and provide early opportunities for connection and education. After all, these are the people who will likely provide ongoing support to the family following the child's placement.

Parents may choose to draw family members and friends into the home study process since this can be a stressful time for everyone. Providing factual information about agency procedures and home visits can demystify the journey and answer questions early on. Agencies are typically happy to provide educational resources about the agency or program for families when asked. Oftentimes, the wait is difficult for future grandparents, aunts, uncles, and friends, too. Inviting them to research the child's country of origin or engaging in cultural celebrations can also offer a sense of inclusion. Family and friends can journal their own thoughts and excitement as

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<sup>2</sup> Center for Adoption Support and Education. (n.d.). *W.I.S.E. Up program*. Center for Adoption Support. <https://adoptionssupport.org/w-i-s-e-up-program/>

they await the child's arrival (this could even be a special gift for the child down the road).

If the adoption has some level of openness, family and friends may be interested in meeting the child's birth family. In infant adoption, pursuing a meeting early on (e.g., a hospital visit immediately following the child's birth) can be overwhelming for both the adoptive parents and the child's birth parent(s). Parents may choose to bridge this connection throughout the child's life, including at birthday parties or other significant celebrations. This type of connection can send a powerful message to the child about the many people who love them and needs to be mutually agreed upon by both families.

Following a child's arrival home, it may be helpful to parents for their community to acknowledge and respect the transitional stage of adoption. The earliest days after parents bring their new child home are critical for establishing bonding and trust between parents and a new child.<sup>3</sup> During these first few months, adoptive parents should be the primary ones meeting their child's needs, including feeding, diapering, bathing, etc. These daily tasks teach the child a long-term lesson that *"My parent(s) will meet my needs"* and build a foundation of trust for the new family. Practicing this may be tough for some loved ones, who desire to be more intimately involved. This type of integration work does not mean family and friends must stay away altogether; instead, slowly and consistently introducing these important people will help familiarize the child with new faces and voices. For families welcoming older children, keeping photos of loved ones on hand and talking about them as a family can deepen the

child's sense of safety and stability as visits continue to occur.

Extended family and friends can help in other practical ways, such as dropping off meals, offering carpool or childcare for other children in the home, cleaning, or simply asking the adoptive parents what would be most helpful to them. Any practical way to provide uninterrupted bonding time between a parent and child is a gift. Regardless of the child's age, friends and family can have some involvement in the journey.

## Cultural Considerations

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Parenting through adoption inevitably requires a commitment on the part of the adoptive parents to understand the challenges that adoptees might experience. It also necessitates that they do intentional work to become healing parents for children who have experienced grief, loss, and trauma. Adoption brings families into the complicated, but often beautiful, world of open relationships with birth parents. This work offers meaningful avenues to aid in a child's healing from their early life experiences.

Especially for children who do not share the same race as their parents, adoptive parents' cultural competence is a unique opportunity for learning to offer their child yet another path to healing. Transracial adoptive parents must be ready to provide racial representation in their home and community. Consider the books in the home, the television shows the family watches, and the neighborhood the child lives in. *Do these children have opportunities to see other people in everyday life*

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<sup>3</sup> Purvis, K. B., Cross, D. R., & Sunshine, W. (2007). *The connected child: Bring hope and healing to your adoptive family*. McGraw-Hill.

who look like them? Even considering whether a child's crayons provide an opportunity for them to draw pictures that look like themselves can be crucial in positive racial identity development.

The child's community also plays a role in affirming their cultural identity. Adoptive parents should talk openly with friends and family about why these considerations matter. Encourage others to learn and engage so your child is surrounded by people who reflect, respect, and celebrate their identity. Open and confident conversations about race are an inevitable part of open communication for transracial families that adoptive parents should be prepared for. Parents must acknowledge that transracial adoptees have a significant lack of privacy regarding their adoption status and yet still deserve the same level of privacy in choosing whether to share their stories. Without open communication with their parents, children in transracial families are left to navigate and process this experience alone. When transracial adoptive parents take the lead in initiating these conversations, they offer a gift of acceptance and preciousness to their child.

Lastly, transracial adoptive parents must desire to move toward cultural competence and remain open to ongoing learning, with the child's best interest centered. This may require an effort to understand skin and hair care for parents whose children's skin or hair texture is different than their own. Adoptive parents should encourage extended family and friends to approach this part of the child's identity with humility and seek out advice or help from members of the child's racial community. Parents must help their children understand and celebrate their culture, which

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will require some effort. This can be a shared journey; consider doing research together, utilizing your agency's resources, finding restaurants that serve cultural cuisine, or attending museums or other community events that immerse the family in the child's cultural background.

## Conclusion

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Adoption brings with it both beauty and complexity. Open, thoughtful communication can help demystify the adoption experience for extended family and friends while creating a supportive and inclusive space for the child. When parents are proactive in setting boundaries, inviting education, and embracing their child's story, they model confidence and care. By fostering open conversations and preparing for the questions that may arise, adoptive families create a nurturing environment where their children can deepen their belonging and empower them to share their adoption stories, at their own pace, with pride and resilience.

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## About the Authors

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Anna joined the Lifeline Asia team in 2013 and now serves as Lifeline's Post Adoption Manager. Her main role is to provide support and resources for domestic and international families in post-adoption. She obtained her undergrad in religious studies from Samford University. From there, she attended Baylor University to obtain her Masters of Social Work. Her husband, Jesse, is a pastor. They have four beautiful children, Erika, Hall, Simeon, and Rosie. In her free time, she is an amateur florist. Anna's three simple joys are Starbucks, flowers, and watching the sun set on her parents' ranch. Her favorite thing about working at Lifeline is "getting to interact with other adoptive parents like herself."

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Claire is a Trust Based Relational Intervention Practitioner and a Clinical Social Worker. Claire earned her Bachelor's degree in Sociology at Samford University and her Master's degree in Social Work from the University of Alabama and is currently a private practice therapist in Birmingham, AL working with individuals and families impacted by adoption, foster care, grief, anxiety, and trauma. Claire is also an adoptive parent; she and her husband have 3 teenage sons, living in the Birmingham area.

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Traci Newell is a graduate of the University of Alabama at Birmingham and is a licensed social worker. She has been on staff at Lifeline since 2003 and serves as Director of Church-Based Programs. As a TIPS-MAPP Master Trainer, Traci has been equipped to prepare social workers and church partners across the country for ministries to vulnerable children, families, and women. She considers it a great honor to share what the Lord is doing in the lives of people all around us!

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