

Talking About Adoption: Positive Language

By Joan McNamara, MS

When we talk about adoption within our families and in the wider community, what we say not only communicates appropriate information and positive, respectful attitudes about adoption, it can influence how others, including our children, consider all aspects of adoption in the future. Using out-dated language, including some phrases about “special” aspects of adoption or birth, can perpetuate stereotypes (many of them negative) that devalue adoption and those involved with adoptions: children, birthparents, adoptive families, adoption professionals. Using other words and phrases can bring across the concepts that adoption and birth are both viable, positive alternatives in family building. As some children point out “Adoption is just another kind of normal”.

When thinking of how we talk about adoption in general and adoption in our families, consider how some of the usual phrasing may bring unspoken, misleading messages to children and parents touched by adoption. For example, if someone refers to a birthparent who has made an adoption plan for a child as the child’s “real” or “natural” parent, what does that make the adoptive parent of that child? Unreal? Unnatural? Other common examples include situations when others ask adoptive families questions about how much their child “cost”, and if the family has any children of “their own”, as if adopted children somehow didn’t count in the same way as biological children. Both of these examples, especially when voiced in front of the child, bring across—even if not intended—messages about adoption, adoptive families, and adopted children as being somehow second best.

Also, although adoption is always part of a family’s journey through life, it doesn’t have to always have to be the most important emphasis in family identity or always discussed in detail (or sometimes, discussed at all) with those outside the family. Some things are part of a child’s own story and our family’s own story and not automatically shared with others. It’s important to remember this if our children are very young when they enter our family, since we might be more likely to discuss facts than that are part of our child’s personal history. Information that belongs to our child may be inappropriate as public knowledge when our child is old enough to understand the meanings. This would include information about our child’s background, genetic history, and other private, personal facts, especially negative information such as abuse and neglect.

Gently rephrasing comments, questions, and outdated language of others so that these are stated in more appropriate ways, especially in front of our children, can be one way to redirect and correct information, influence attitudes, and avoid emotionally laden, out of date phrases and words that can perpetuate negative stereotypes. Correcting misinformation at the beginning may have some lasting influence as our child grows older and confronts some of these attitudes and phrases with growing understanding.

Here are some examples of language which can bring across less than helpful impressions about adoption, and some alternatives to these which might be more appropriate in helping to bring across information and attitudes that are both more accurate and more positive.

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Carolina Adoption Services (336) 275-9660 fax (336) 273-9804

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Language now out-of-date

Real parent, natural parent

Real child (*see "own", below*)

(Adopted) child given away/up.
taken away, thrown away

My/your *own* child
(meaning yours by birth,
not by adoption)
example: your own child and
your adopted child; couldn't
you have any of your own?

Foreign adoption; foreign
child, child from abroad

Track down "real" parents;
Reunite with (real) parents

Handicapped child, special
needs child

Hard to place, Waiting child

Illegitimate child

Language more appropriate

Birthparent, biological parent,
first parent(s)

My/our child, my/our own child;
"This is the third anniversary of
when we adopted our child"

An adoption plan made (by birth
family and/or the courts)

Birthchild, born into the family,
example: Our first child was born
into the family, our second was
adopted. Our children are great!
We love our children so much.

International adoption; child born
in another country, in X country

Search; meet with, family meeting

A child with__ or who had/was ____
(child's situation or needs)

Our child was waiting for us;
We feel that our child was somehow
meant to be in our family.

Child's birthparents were not married

(Question: Why would people need this information anyway?)

Questions:

Have you heard or used any of the out-of-date phrases before; have you thought about what these might mean to parents and children?

Have you heard or used any of the more appropriate phrases?

Which feel comfortable to use and which less comfortable for you to use?

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How might you cope with people who want to discuss information you feel is private?

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