

Spotlight: Race and Adoption and its impacts on children, families

# Adoption Today

October 2015

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# Race & Adoption . . . Prepare to Protect

**I'm** guessing that by the title of this editorial, you already have some idea that this is a less than idyllic topic for newer adoptive parents. What I think we may be able to help you with in this issue of *Adoption Today* is how to mitigate the negative impact on transracially adopted children living in an all-white area.

As white parents, we tend to minimize the importance of race and buy into the public rhetoric that we are doing better today — that race is less of an issue and racial prejudice and racism have lessened. That is hardly the case. One only needs to get involved with a forum where parents with children of color are sharing their experiences and adult adoptees talk about what it was like, what it is now, or read about racism from the perspective of Asian Americans or other groups to know that it is an absolute falsehood.

We need to recognize that race is the **FIRST** thing people notice about a person. No one says that when they see a white person/child because that is accepted as the “norm” — the yardstick against which we measure and identify all others. When someone is of a different racial heritage though, folks notice. Race prejudice is the tree — racism is the forest.

It is tough for transracially adopted children to grow up in a mostly — or completely white area. The only people they see are white, so they tend to grow up hoping that they can somehow blend in — that their race won't be too obvious. Without the opportunity to meet and get to know people of color — they integrate the stereotypes about people of color. Seeing Chinese people in a public place is not the same as getting to know someone or a family or a lot of grown-ups so that one knows, first hand, that the stereotypes don't fit.

These children will and do encounter race prejudice, being singled out in ways that make them feel “different” and often alone. They are asked intrusive questions and regularly are on the receiving end of observations that usually make them feel “different” in ways that are inferior, especially when it comes from peers.

Theoretical discussions about how race is a social construct will not arm transracially adopted children for the encounters they will have once they are no longer shielded, all-day, every day from the outside world. We have long seen the effects of parents who think it is possible to raise their transracially adopted children with a colorblind philosophy and know that it does not arm youngsters for life as teens and adults. It is not fair or effective or child-centered to assume that this is going to work well without looking at readily available evidence that it does.

If you do nothing else for your children, PLEASE connect with adult transracially adopted populations, with people of color, with parents who have “been there” and consider how you need to help your children navigate through our race-conscious society with learned strategies for countering prevailing attitudes, beliefs, policies and racist practices. A “rainbow world” philosophy is a wonderful thought, but it just doesn't hold up when it comes to living in the real world as people of color.

I hope that this issue of *Adoption Today* is your gateway to the realities of what our children will encounter as they make their way through the adolescent and teen years without the protection of loving family and friends.

For the Children,

**Richard**



# AdoptionToday

october 2015 | Volume 18 Number 2

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Supported by funding from grant #1EAAPA141024-01-00 from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. The contents are solely the responsibility of Nightlight and do not necessarily represent the office views of the Department.

Printed in the U.S.A.

**Adoption TODAY** is published monthly by Louis & Company Publishing, 541 East Garden Drive • Unit N • Windsor, CO 80550. Periodical postage rate paid in Windsor, Colorado and additional mailing offices (USPS 019-435).

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**Subscriptions:** \$14.00 a year. Subscriptions should be sent to **Adoption TODAY**, Subscription Dept., 541 East Garden Drive • Unit N • Windsor, CO 80550. Manuscripts and photographs are welcome and should be sent to the Editorial Office, 541 East Garden Drive • Unit N • Windsor, CO 80550.

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Postmaster: Send address changes to: **Adoption TODAY**  
541 East Garden Drive • Unit N • Windsor, CO 80550

AdoptionTODAY (ISSN 1527-8522)

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### on the cover

Leah Pihlaja, is a transracial adoptee. Adoption has always been a prominent and honest point in Pihlaja's life from childhood to adulthood thanks to the honest and open relationship she shares with her parents. Pihlaja resides in the Twin Cities and works as a marketing director in the hospitality industry. She manages her daily blessings with her husband, son and daughter.

## news briefs

### **IBESR Advises that Haitian Intercountry Adoptions Must be Full (Plenary)**

The Department of State, the Department of Homeland Security, and U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services recently advised prospective adoptive parents, adoptive parents and adoption service providers of new information provided by the Haitian Central Authority, L'Institut du Bien-Etre Social et de Recherches (IBESR). IBESR advised that its 2013 law reforming adoptions requires that all intercountry adoptions completed after November 2013 must be completed as plenary (full) adoptions. The Department and USCIS are seeking clarification with IBESR and the appropriate courts to determine if simple adoptions already completed by U.S. citizens after November 2013 may be sufficient for U.S. immigration purposes.

According to IBESR, under Haiti's 2013 adoption law, simple adoptions may not terminate all of the birth parents' legal rights and might be subject to revocation at the request of the birth family at any point before the child turns 18. Pursuant to information from IBESR, simple adoptions completed in Haiti may need to be converted to a plenary adoption through the Haitian conversion process in order to be sufficient for intercountry adoption. The Department and USCIS have requested additional information from IBESR. Once we have additional guidance from the Haitian authorities, the Department and USCIS will publish information for impacted families, if any additional steps become necessary.

For further information, contact the Department's Office of Children's Issues via email at [Adoption@state.gov](mailto:Adoption@state.gov). For case specific inquiries, contact the U.S. Embassy Port-au-Prince Adoption Unit at [PAPadoptions@state.gov](mailto:PAPadoptions@state.gov). For additional updated, visit [adoption.state.gov](http://adoption.state.gov).

### **Bhutan Issues Rules Permitting Intercountry Adoption**

On August 28, the Royal Bhutanese Embassy in New Delhi, India informed the U.S. Central Authority that the government of Bhutan

has ended its suspension on intercountry adoption. Bhutan passed the Child Adoption Act in 2012 and the Child Adoption Rules and Regulations 2015 entered into force on January 1, 2015. U.S. citizens may apply to adopt a Bhutanese orphan if suitable Bhutanese prospective adoptive parents cannot be found within Bhutan. For more information about Bhutan's adoption regulations, refer to the National Commission for Women and Children website at <http://www.ncw.nic.in>. For further information, visit [adoption.state.gov](http://adoption.state.gov).

### **Wendy's Delivers Children's 'Family First' Moments through Cups, Coupon Books**

Remember the first time you rode a bike, saw a movie or went on a family vacation? For some children in foster care, many of these moments happen only after they've waited years to find their forever family. Wendy's® whose Founder Dave Thomas was adopted, is celebrating these "family first" moments this fall by featuring illustrations from four children who were adopted on Wendy's beverage cups. In addition, to help create more of these moments, Wendy's is launching its second nationwide Halloween Coupon Books in-restaurant fundraising initiative.

"Dave Thomas believed that children in foster care 'aren't someone else's responsibility, they are our responsibility.' Wendy's continues to live out this value through fundraising and its partnership with the Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption® to ensure that every child has the childhood they deserve," said Liz Geraghty, vice president of Wendy's brand marketing. "We've dedicated ourselves and our Brand to help bring awareness to foster care adoption and raise critical funds needed to unite children in foster care with forever families."

Illustrations on Wendy's beverage cups depict four children's individual experiences at the beach, the zoo, an amusement park and celebrating a birthday with their forever family. Customers can visit [wendys.com/adoption](http://wendys.com/adoption) to see the children's stories come to life and become a part of the "family first" moment by listening to and watching animated illustrations narrated or written by each child.

The children in these stories were part of Wendy's Wonderful Kids®, a signature program of the DTFA that focuses on helping children who have been waiting the longest in the foster care system get adopted.

The featured stories include:

- Angel, 12 — Sometimes it only takes a nudge to change your life's course. For Wendy, that nudge came when she heard an adoption commercial on the radio. Soon after, Wendy adopted Angel. Since then, both Wendy and Angel have found their entire lives, which now includes a dog named Ginger, changed for the better.
- Olivia, 11 — Born with special needs, Olivia had been in more than seven foster homes and was about to be placed in a private girls' home when the Hargis family adopted her. As empty nesters, Lorie and Dwain Hargis felt called to adopt. Now Olivia has a stable home and loving forever family.
- Richard, 10 — Richard's wish was to find a forever family. He requested that his Wendy's Wonderful Kids recruiter save pictures of him to share with his family when they came for him. After four years and 10 months in foster care, Gwen and Robert adopted Richard thanks to the special attention from Richard's Wendy's Wonderful Kids recruiter.
- Rigo, 16 — Rigo and Robert are proof that there is no boundary love cannot overcome. Many obstacles stood between Robert and his son — not only age, but the system's concerns about race differences too. It took two years for the adoption to be finalized, but with the help of Rigo's Wendy's Wonderful Kids recruiter, the two are a family. Now, Rigo is active in his community as a Boy Scout, and he volunteers at his local food bank.

In addition, from now through Nov. 1, Wendy's will sell Halloween Coupon Books, which include five or 10 free Jr. Frosty® coupons, for \$1. Proceeds from these sales will go to help find families for children waiting in foster care. Last year, the Halloween Coupon Book program raised \$3.6 million for the DTFA and programs such as Wendy's Wonderful Kids.



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# A Visit to Casa Viva

## Costa Rica's Living Family Model for Children

By Becky Weichhand™

At the Congressional Coalition on Adoption Institute, we believe that every child deserves a family, and that family care is the best alternative for children who have been separated from their biological families. Each of our programs are designed to bring the voices of experts and those with direct experience in identifying barriers or solutions to finding children their forever family to the halls of Congress. Because U.S. law and policy touch not only on domestic foster care and adoptions, but also international programming and development assistance for orphans and vulnerable children, CCAI brings the stories and experiences of children living without families around the world to Capitol Hill through our Congressional Resource Program and 20/20 Vision Program. One of the great privileges of our work is to highlight successful models that we come across.

### Casa Viva

I first heard about Casa Viva in 2012 from a videographer. Around that same time, I attended a national conference where the leadership of Casa Viva received an award for their model program helping an entire nation understand what it looks like to transition from orphanages to caring for children in local families. I was intrigued, and over the years as I have had more and more opportunities to learn about Casa Viva, it became high on my list of “must visit” model programs. This year, I finally had the opportunity to see it firsthand.

### The Living Family Model

I had the pleasure of visiting Casa Viva's San Jose center and spending time with the staff



there. Several components of their model stood out to me and demonstrated why this model has been so highly acclaimed.

- **Child-Centered, Living Family Solutions.**

Until recently, the only option for care for children separated from their biological families in Costa Rica has been institutions. In fact, Costa Rica's child welfare system is currently made up of 75 orphanages. Established on a small scale initially, Casa Viva has been the only family placement agency in the nation since 2005. The Casa Viva model is based on a core belief: Children separated from their families need “a living family and their community of relationships,” which offer those children their best chance at thriving through “attachment and connection with circles of care.” The Casa Viva staff are strikingly joyful in their daily work serving Costa Rica's children. My assessment is that this is in large part due to their confidence in the success of their model of living family care for the children in their caseloads.

- **Government Partnership.** Casa Viva works hard to engage and partner with the Costa

Rican government leaders responsible for children's welfare, including administration and judicial leaders. Casa Viva is officially contracted with the Costa Rican government as the only family placement agency in the nation. As judges have seen the success of the children they place with Casa Viva families, they increasingly request Casa Viva placements for the children on their dockets. Casa Viva also actively engages Costa Rica's government as a financial partner in supporting these family placements. While many programs operating in international locations might be tempted to try to “work around” government processes, Casa Viva intentionally makes great effort to directly engage and partner with, communicate to and support their government leaders.

- **Church Partnerships.** Foundational to the work of Casa Viva is the partnership and wrap-around support of local churches in Costa Rica. Casa Viva families are supported through a model that first identifies churches committed to participating in the model and then provides pastoral support, a volunteer coordinator and supporting volunteers or families who are trained before a child is placed into a foster family that attends the church. While the family is individually tasked with the government custodial responsibility of guardianship of the child, the full church “receives” the child and supports the foster family during the child's time in this placement. There is a level of understanding, sensitivity and support within the Casa Viva family's church community that surpasses what I have seen in other models of wraparound support for families. This element is foundational to the place-

ment process, and the stories the Casa Viva staff shared with me about their foster families and children highlighted the success of this wraparound support model.

- **Social Services and Support.**

The team of Casa Viva staff I met was an incredible group of credentialed and experienced psychologists and social workers dedicated to the holistic care of the children they place in Casa Viva families. That Casa Viva is dedicated to excellence is clear in the organization's investment in this a multidisciplinary team of professionals. After the Casa Viva families are wrapped around by families in their local church and community, this extra layer of professional expertise and support is an incredible resource for Casa Viva families to draw on and be strengthened by as they care for children.

- **National Leadership.**

The vision for Casa Viva is an organization owned and implemented nationally. Casa Viva's staff is made up of local Costa Ricans and directed by a Costa Rican volunteer board of directors. The two Americans who designed Casa Viva 10 years ago have continued to step more and more into the background, so that at this point none of the daily work touching Casa Viva children and families is accomplished by these two — the work is all in the hands of Costa Ricans. The goal is turning all leadership over to Costa Ricans in the coming years.

- **Sustainability.** Casa Viva is pursuing a full self-sustainability, which means its programs will be fully funded through local and national resources. Currently 85 percent of Casa Viva funding comes from within Costa Rica through a mixture of government, foundation, corporate, church and individual contributions. The organization is committed to reaching 100 percent national financial sus-



Senior Staff and Psychologist Director Sonia Barrientos of Casa Viva's Holistic Care Team, holds a photo she keeps on her desk of one of the children thriving in a Casa Viva Family placement.

tainability, and has withstood tests of their commitment to a financial model that is not dependent on a long-term international infusion of funds.

**“When are you going to find my brother and me a family?”**

One story of a 7-year-old boy living with his twin brother in one of the government run institutions, as told to me by the Casa Viva staff in San Jose, exemplifies the importance of their work in Costa Rica.

Casa Viva staff told me they had been asked recently to travel to a particular institution to pick up a child temporarily placed there until a judge made a determination for a placement with one of their Casa Viva families. As the Casa Viva staff arrived at the orphanage to pick up the baby, another little boy stood by watching. Before they left, he approached the Casa Viva staff and asked, “When are you

going to find my brother and me a family?”

Because Casa Viva exists, this little boy knows the difference between his experience in an orphanage and the family placements Casa Viva is working to provide as many children as possible. Casa Viva is shifting paradigms of care for children separated from their families and creating new streams of family care in Costa Rica to serve these children. But the reality that many children still need to experience the attachment and loving care of a family and supportive community motivates Casa Viva and CCAI to press on.

**For More Information**

Read more about Casa Viva in this brochure at [http://www.casaviva.org/Uploads/CasaViva\\_Brochure\\_Children.pdf](http://www.casaviva.org/Uploads/CasaViva_Brochure_Children.pdf). Learn about the Expand Your Spectrum of Care Seminar: <http://www.casaviva.org/seminars-and-consultations>.

For more information about CCAI, visit [www.ccaainstitute.org](http://www.ccaainstitute.org). Sign up for our emails there, like us on Facebook at [www.facebook.com/theccai](http://www.facebook.com/theccai) and follow us on Twitter @ccaainstitute.

*Becky Weichhand is the interim executive director of the Congressional Coalition on Adoption Institute. Prior to CCAI, Weichhand worked with several of the premier child welfare law firms and policy organizations in the country, including the Alliance for Children's Rights and National Council for Adoption. She travels internationally to study and work with orphan care programs in other countries. She directs CCAI's Congressional Resource Program and 20/20 Vision Program and has coordinated congressional delegations to Los Angeles, the United Kingdom, Ethiopia and Guatemala. Weichhand also managed The Way Forward Project, which focused on highlighting the need for family-based care of children in six African nations. Weichhand has a J.D. from Regent Law, and is a licensed attorney in Virginia.*

# Embrace yourself

## Adoption & Identity Intertwined

By Kim Phagan-Hansel

**A** senior in high school, Mei Kelly wanted to do something special for her senior studies project. Adopted from China as an infant, Kelly wanted to do something that was close to her heart and personal experiences.

“It’s a part of who I am,” Kelly said. “It’s a part of my life.”

Kelly was adopted at 9 months old by her mother, who got married shortly after adopting Kelly — the two raised Kelly together to have a strong appreciation for her Chinese heritage. From close connections with other adoptive families to participation in Mandarin language classes, Kelly was often connected to her culture and others like her.

“They have a deep appreciation and respect for Chinese culture,” Kelly said. “They exposed me to the language at a young age studying Mandarin and helped integrate language into my life.”

Her father even helped launch a Mandarin program at Kelly’s high school. Keeping those ties to Kelly’s heritage and early life were important for her parents, Kelly said.

Among her closest friends, Kelly counts her Chinese sisters (other adoptees) who were



adopted around the same timeframe as Kelly and grew up in her community. Growing up with others who had similar stories and experiences is something Kelly said helped her build a positive self-identity.

But despite having positive connections to her culture and her adoption story, Kelly became more aware of her adoption connection and its deep impacts after watching the

film “Somewhere Between” by Linda Goldstein Knowlton. That documentary film follows four Chinese adoptees as they move into adulthood and explore their stories as Americans, Chinese and adoptees.

“The documentary really inspired me,” Kelly said. “I thought it was amazing the movie sparked questions and perspective. It really sparked an interest.”

That interest would lead Kelly to create her own documentary to explore the various thoughts, feelings and emotions that accompany being an adoptee. She reached out to her adoptee friends and acquaintances to create the film "Adoption and Identity Intertwined."

"Most of them were friends of mine," Kelly said. "I tried to pick people who were comfortable with me so they would open up."

In the film, as the questions unfold, the adoptees begin to share the depths of their experiences and the realities of their lives surrounding adoption in the film. From simple responses about the make-up of their families and birth location to more in-depth responses about how familial relationships have been impacted by their adoption, the film explores a wide realm of topics.

"My final set of questions were simple questions starting out and then got more difficult," Kelly said. "It got progressively more in-depth."

Chinese adoptee Meryl Davis shares, "DNA is not everything. It might make up part of who you become and what you look like, but in the end it's up to you and your family and your environment to shape you."

Davis' voice is just one of the many shared in the film that touch on a variety of topics and perspectives surrounding adoption. The participants range in age from 14 to 19 — all just on the cusp of young adulthood.

Vietnamese adoptee Lia Kelly shares, "Sometimes it's really overwhelming in how much you overthink what is unknown, I guess. There's only so many possibilities that you can make up for your story . . . and that it's unknown and it's always really hard to not know some part of your life that everyone else gets to have."

Despite the difficult feelings surrounding adoption, Lia Kelly goes on to say, "Embrace it, embrace it that you're adopted and let it be part of your life." Outside of adoption, they are daughters, sons, sisters, brothers,



students, musicians and so much more than their adoption story.

Throughout the video interviews are also pictures of the adoptees with family members, finding places in China, and other significant moments in their lives. Kelly also included some home video clips from the families that help illustrate the lives of the adoptees featured in the film. Kelly also received editing assistance from award-winning filmmaker Susan Hope Engel.

"I wanted to leave a lasting impact on viewers," Kelly said. "I believe it can be a very good education tool. We're trying to spread it to different schools."

Kelly said she hopes the film will help to create a dialogue for adoptees and provide a window into the hearts of adoptees entering adulthood. Hoping to reach adoptees, adoptive parents and others in the adoption community, Kelly said each person should

take away something new and different from the film.

"I hope adoptees can take away that they're not alone," Kelly said. "There's many who struggle with identity. For adoptive parents, they can be aware of certain issues that might come up and talk to kids about adoption."

In her documentary making process, Kelly also interviewed Dan Matthews, an adult Korean adoptee whose documentary, DANaKaDAN, was released earlier this year. While Matthews' interview doesn't appear in "Adoption and Identity Intertwined," his interview helped give Kelly a balanced look at her documentary. Matthews and Steve Rashid also allowed Kelly to use their music throughout her documentary.

"He gave a completely different perspective on the questions I asked," Kelly said. "Their music in the film helped to bring the underlying mood of the film together."

With that perspective in mind, Kelly is aware that many of her participants may change how they perceive their adoption story as they get older and move into adulthood. Kelly said there were many things she learned from those she interviewed and hopes that down the road she can interview them again.

"They were all grateful for the life they have now," Kelly said. "But adoption is only one part of our identity. The adoptees have suggested a follow-up piece after college."

For now, Kelly is setting her own sights on college. This fall she'll attend Oakton Community College and eventually transfer to San Francisco State University to major in Mandarin as part of SFSU's flagship program. She is also considering a minor in film. Kelly said she is pleased with the outcome of her project and hope it helps impact the lives of others.

"It's a great passion I found in this project," Kelly said.

To view the film, visit <http://www.adoptionbeat.org/adoptee-interviews/>.

A photograph of a woman with short dark hair, wearing a light pink tank top and dark brown shorts, lifting a young child with dark hair into the air. The child is wearing a light pink tank top and bright pink shorts and is laughing joyfully. They are on a sandy beach with the ocean in the background. The image is framed by a large, light-colored circular graphic.

# Transracial Adoption

By Amy C. Johnson, MAE

**T**ransracial adoption refers to a child being adopted by parents of another race. The most common type of transracial adoption occurs when a white family adopts a child of a different race. Each year, approximately 15 percent of American adoptions are transracial adoptions, according to the book “Taking Sides: Clashing Views in Childhood and Society.” While proponents of transracial adoption believe that a good home, regardless of race, will benefit and provide for the child, those against transracial adoption

believe that a child’s culture will be lost when adopted outside his or her race.

A main argument against transracial adoptions is white parents will not be able to prepare their black children for the real world. In the article, “Being raised by white people: Navigating racial difference among adopted multiracial adults,” the author found that in conducting a study of black adults who were raised by white parents, the majority had never been in a room that was not primarily white.

Feelings of alienation, in that there were few available people who had insight into their racial struggles, were expressed. The sample felt different because they did not look like others in their family. While their parents showed colorblindness, the parents could not understand the child’s feelings. The parents could say that the children should ignore taunts and refuse to befriend a racist child, but the parents did not truly have to deal with the racial slurs as the children did. However, the participants remembered that the parents

hurt with them when they hurt, which was a help to the children. This finding is encouraging in that the transracial adoptees remember the love and caring nature that the parents provided.

In the same study, the researcher found that parents did not discuss race with the children until racist comments brought forth the conversation. The participants would rather the parents had anticipated and prepared them for the struggles the children would face. The transracial adoptees felt disconnected from knowing who they were racially and felt not fully accepted in either the black or white populations. While in white circles, the skin color made for an obvious difference. When they were with black people, they spoke and acted different because of their upbringing. They felt the need to explain that they were raised by white parents, which explained the cultural differences.

Other evidence indicates that transracial adoption is not as harmful as some believe. Participants in the same study spoke of advantages and opportunities afforded them through transracial adoption, such as good education, travel and a chance at higher education. Additionally, transracial adoption joins people of different races, which decreases prejudice. The article, "The case for transracial adoption" notes that among transracial adoption families, racial prejudice was absent in both the white birth children and the racially different adopted children.

The majority of the research shows that transracially adopted children are as well-adjusted as same race adopted children. It has been found that self-esteem does not suffer if a child is adopted by parents of a different race. Simon and Altstein conducted a study comparing the self-esteem scores of black adoptees, adopted children of another race, white adoptees, and biological children within the families. The results showed nearly identical scores, indicating that children who were transracially adopted did not suffer from a lower self-esteem.

Transracially adopted individuals express a desire to know their cultural backgrounds. This should be taken into account when adopt-

ing a child of a different race. To allow the child to have cultural understanding, parents can learn more about that culture, participate in local ethnic events, and socialize in places where the child's race is represented. The authors of "The case for transracial adoption" state that parents may also discuss books, holidays and music highlighting the child's race. The article, "Adjustments of transracially and inracially adopted young adults" states that transracial adoption children living in predominately white neighborhoods had more feelings of discomfort than those of families living in heterogeneous areas. Perhaps parents should consider the area they live in, because adoptees of any race may have more adjustment problems if they feel uncomfortable in their surroundings.

With evidence indicating the importance of allowing a transracial adoptee to know his or her cultural heritage, the foster family's willingness and understanding of cultural diversity should be explored before placement of a child. The authors of "Toward a theory of cultural competence in transcultural parenting: The role of cultural receptivity" encourage caseworkers to assess the family's cultural receptivity, an "openness to participate in activities that stimulate children's cultural development" before child placement. Through discussion and The Cultural Receptivity in Fostering Scale, caseworkers will be able to make transracial adoption placements with families who are more willing to support the child's race and culture. Additionally, trainings can be offered to foster and prospective adoptive families.

Opponents of transracial adoption say that white parents cannot help black children form a positive black identity. However, as the author of "'Race isn't what defines me': Exploring identity choices in transracial, biracial, and monoracial families" points out, the meaning of positive black identity connotes that all black people should feel the same way about themselves, regardless of socio-economic situation, education, sexual orientation and surroundings, simply because they are black. This argument also suggests that every black parent can raise a black child better than any white parent, as discussed in the article,

"Commentary: cultural stereotypes can and do die: It's time to move on with transracial adoption."

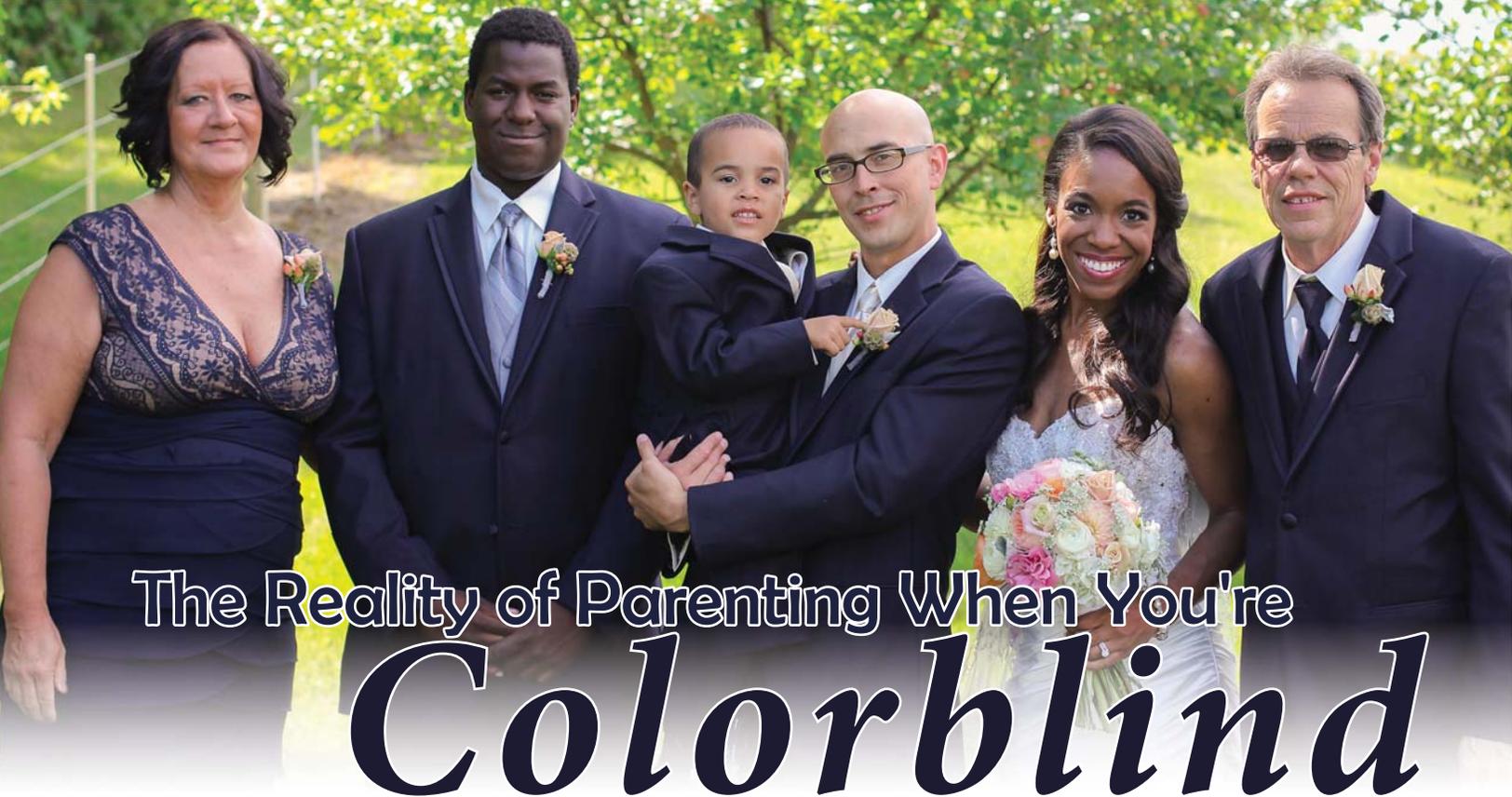
It is believed that black children raised by white parents cannot truly understand or fit into the black culture. However, this statement implies that all black people live in the same culture. While black transracial adoptees, as adults, will say that their speech, dress or musical interests may differ from those of inner city blacks, this can be true of many blacks who did not grow up in the inner city.

Transracial adoptions are highly debated primarily due to the arguments that (1) white parents cannot prepare minorities for the prejudice the child will face in the world and (2) children need to experience the culture of their birth to truly understand who they are. While it may be true that white parents cannot understand the black child's role in the world, this does not cancel out the benefits of wider opportunities and less time spent in foster care. Additionally, with education and training, foster families can come to understand the importance of introducing each child to his or her birth culture, leading to more opportunities for the child to connect culturally. Research suggests that transracially adopted children do not suffer from self-esteem or a lack of identity, but instead receive a color-blind home in which to thrive.

*Amy C. Johnson is a doctoral candidate at Texas Woman's University. She is studying early childhood development and education and is pursuing a career in teaching at a university. She is currently working on her dissertation, which focuses on victims of sex trafficking.*

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# The Reality of Parenting When You're *Colorblind*

By Leah Pihlaja

**I**t's hard to believe it's almost been a year since I started the search for my biological mother. In June 2014, I called my mom on the phone and said, "Mom, if you're good with this, I think I'm ready to start looking for my biological mother."

There was some silence. I was 26 years old and what went from being a routine call turned into advancing one of the biggest decisions I'd make as an adult adoptee. My parents agreed they'd help and guide me in anyway they could. I expected this from them, nonetheless.

In order to gather my thoughts, materials and magnitude of phone calls or emails made, I created a blog as I wanted to do this search on my own without any private investigator of some sort. My blog, *You're Holding Your Pencil Wrong*, has ultimately soared across the states — further than I ever imaged. Mostly, it's a way to show my biological parents that I am alive and well.

Early into the search, I contacted the agency my parents worked with in Minnesota, Evolve Adoptions and Family Services. Although the staff at Evolve didn't have anymore information than I already had, they definitely showed their support and offered additional resources to speak of childhood as an adult adoptee.

Within weeks, I found myself on a panel called, "Multicultural Parenting in a Racist Society." On this panel, those touched by transracial adoption share their experiences to potential parents who are adopting outside their race. It seemed there was always that one question, "What does your mom think about your search for biological relatives?"

My mom? My mom's experiencing a roller coaster of emotions and learning to adjust to new advancements just as I am. It's safe to say that my entire family and friends, especially my parents, are excited, happy, scared, hopeful and extremely anxious as anyone would be.

Did I also mention my mom is Caucasian? It's true, but so is my dad, husband, the majority of my extended family, friends, my neighbors, my co-workers and so on.

I was adopted at 5 weeks from Georgia to Minnesota. My aunt and uncle had adopted African American children through Evolve (formerly Crossroads) so the idea of adoption was always present to my parents. However, when the issue of infertility arose, adoption came a little quicker than assumed for my parents — they were open to race but leaned toward African American children so my cousins had family who could share a similar story.

I grew up in a small town to the point I knew most kids I went to school with. I was about one of five African American children in my school and most were adopted as well. I'm fortunate for the community I did grow up in, never was there a time I had to stand up for the color of my skin or the appearance of my family. There were the basic questions kids asked of course, such as "Why is your mom and dad white and you aren't?"

Fortunately, my parents chose to be quite open and right-minded at a young age about my adoption so I was able to answer efficiently and proud to be part of a mixed-race family.

Aside from having a close understanding of adoption, the issue of race wasn't a regular topic between us. As I continue with research about adoption as an adult, I find this to be a possible problem with my childhood. I do believe my parents raised their little brown babies in a time where "colorblindness" in America was gaining ground. We never saw each other as a different race, it wasn't an issue nor concern at the dinner table because this was our family and it's all we knew. The resources and racial crimes were not present in our community, I can't say who is to blame or justify why it took me 26 years to realize I need to speak up and proclaim my roots. So yes —

Undoubtedly, the topic of race in my childhood was basically avoided, until now.

I'm left with this streaming through my head; what happens when you become a parent today when you were raised in a "colorblind" society?

In 2009, I became pregnant and gave birth to my son. I was young, naive and looking back, I was completely colorblind to the issues that surrounded me as a young African American woman. As I got closer to delivery, my mom said, "He'll have your blood, Leah." Of course he will, it's my child. But the difference is that I do not know a sole person who shares the same mannerisms, features or blood as me. That's that thing right there about (closed) adoption — there are many gaps that our children quickly allow you to fill in when you become a parent. My husband is also Caucasian, again — all I knew was "white," as uneducated as that sounds, this is what has led me to where I am today. The impression of my child having dark skin, curly hair and a flat nose was beyond me. Strange? It's true... I had these thoughts. As a parent though, an immediate guard went up and I was on high defense, willing to do anything for my child, especially if someone discourages his ambitions to set-forth into the world.

Before my most recent panel with Evolve, I thought again... Here I am, speaking to these parents who are desperately taking in every last word we're willing to share about our experience growing up, yet I am at a loss as to how to handle racism when it comes to my biracial child.

Would my heart shatter as I search for the nearest wall and weep for my child? That would be my immediate response — IF I had not learned from these parents I was speaking to.

I honor, relate to and praise the parents I have come in contact with on the Evolve panels. I strive to further my knowledge on racial issues, demographics and speak them thoroughly and respectfully to my child. I understand there is a time and place to deliver such matters, but at the age of 5 years old, I am convinced there is much to be said to our children while their

minds are young and growing. As adults, we're apt to step around an issue, avoid it in order to not offend. But why are we offended? We're offended because we choose not to speak out and to lead our children to continue as if we're walking on fire.

"How did your parents handle racism toward you?"

They didn't.

My son's response to this will be unlike mine. We're living in a different time with appropriate resources, and that I am thankful for. As we sit and eat cupcakes in our mall, a great deal of me wants to take advantage of our quiet-time to tell him all about the men and women who fought, stood up, endured and shouted out loud to pave a path that led to where we are today. I want to tell him about the day our President said, "Yes we can!" and crowds roared. Or maybe, about a time in history when it was thought to be wrong for our family of mixed-race to love one another. But instead, at 5 years old, I'll hold his hand real tight and tell him, "Stand up tall son, let's walk." And from there, we'll keep walking hand-in-hand until we're able to find the people, answers and solutions that guide us. Whether or not my journey in search and reunion turns to be successful, I feel as if I have been challenged and educated while I am teaching beyond my wildest dreams.

*Born a Georgia peach, but raised as a small town mid-west girl in Minnesota, Leah Pihlaja, along with her younger brother (born in 1995 in Louisiana) claim the title of transracial adoptee. Adoption has always been a prominent and honest point in Pihlaja's life from childhood to adulthood thanks to the honest and open relationship she shares with her parents. In June 2014 a blog titled, "You're Holding Your Pencil Wrong," was created in efforts to share stories and future resources for adoptees while Pihlaja embarked on the search for her biological relatives from her closed adoption in 1987. Throughout the process, Pihlaja has found a voice in adoption, reunion and interracial family advocacy. Pihlaja resides in the Twin Cities and works as a marketing director in the hospitality industry. She manages her daily blessings with her husband, son and daughter.*



*A new approach to helping transracial families navigate their*

# Transracial Family

*While my parents did the best they could with what they knew, like me, they didn't know much. We had no benefit of history or hindsight, institutional support, books to guide us, or even ways of knowing what we were getting right or wrong. Instead we found ourselves being the clinical trials and day laborers of a grand and complex social experiment known as transracial adoption.*

*At Transracial Family Coaching we believe that, in addition to belonging to an individual family, transracial adoptees are part of a larger family. As the elders of this family, we believe our first-hand personal and collective experiences as transracial adoptees place us in a unique position to equip transracial families with information, training, guidance, skills and tools not available elsewhere. We invite you to take a moment and review our Declaration of Beliefs, Services, Biography, Media and Contact Pages. We look forward to partnering with you and your child as you explore and address those critical questions of "Who am I?" "Who do I want to be?" and "How do others see me?"*

**W**hen Chad Goller-Sojourner was just 13 months old he was adopted by his parents. That event would forever change the trajectory of Goller-Sojourner's life as a black infant raised in a white adoptive family. Raised with a Samoan sister and biracial brother, Goller-Sojourner was not alone on his transracial adoption journey, but his exposure to other African-Americans was limited.

"When I went to Western Washington University it was really transformative for me," Goller-Sojourner said. "It was the first time I really socialized with black kids."

Now, he's attempting to educate other transracial adoptive families, so their young children do not have the same jolting experience when they leave the protection of their adoptive families. Goller-Sojourner recently launched Transracial Family Coaching to guide adoptive families on their transracial parenting journey.

Goller-Sojourner is no stranger to working with adoptive families. He's created two solo shows around his experiences as a transracial adoptee — "Sitting in Circles with Rich White Girls: Memoirs of a Bulimic Black Boy" and "Riding in Cars with Black People and Other Newly Dangerous Acts: A Memoir in Vanishing Whiteness." Both plays explore his experiences and efforts to find his identity as a black man in today's world.

"The play 'Riding in Cars with Black People and Other Newly Dangerous Acts: A Memoir in Vanishing Whiteness' explores what it was like for a black boy aged out of whiteness," Goller-Sojourner said. "People would seek me out. It began to spiral, especially with my shows."

His experience performing the two plays led adoptive families to reach out to him asking for advice and guidance on their own parenting journeys. But Goller-Sojourner wanted to

take that education one step further in providing some type of formalized program.

**"My program, my courses are pretty intense. Surprisingly, we've come a long ways, but we haven't come far enough on identity formation. When people know better, they can do better. They just need the solution to get there."**

"Having been a teacher and professor, I'm pretty good at crafting education," Goller-Sojourner said. "I hit people in different ways so they learn."

The program touches on various aspects of the transracial adoption process and includes one-on-one coaching and distance learning courses. From topics on self, social and multiple identities to how parental identity impacts transracial adop-

tees, Goller-Sojourner will delve into some of the toughest subjects for adoptive parents and the children they're raising.

"There's a lot of camps and retreats, but those aren't ongoing," Goller-Sojourner said. "My program, my courses are pretty intense. Surprisingly, we've come a long ways, but we haven't come far enough on identity forma-

*lives and the world they live in*

# Coaching

By Kim Phagan-Hansel



tion. When people know better, they can do better. They just need the solution to get there.”

Goller-Sojourner said he doesn't really care to go into the debate about whether transracial adoption is good or bad, but rather focus on the fact that it is a reality. Children are being adopted transracially and those parents need to be educated to prepare their children for the path ahead, Goller-Sojourner said.

“Progress with adoption is controversial,” Goller-Sojourner said. “But it's not going to stop.”

However, Goller-Sojourner has some tough words for those considering transracial adoption. Most importantly, “Your child should not be your first black friend,” he said. “Adoptees are children for a very short time, so you need to prepare them for that adult world.”

He said it's important for adoptive parents to get real with their thoughts and feelings on race and be prepared to have tough conversations with their children. With recent police shootings of young black men and other racially charged events, Goller-Sojourner said there's no sugar coating the issues transracial adoptive parents are facing.

“The word race is in transracial and you need to be comfortable having that conversation,” Goller-Sojourner said. “You need to ask yourself, ‘why do you think you can raise a child of a different race? Who should be uncomfortable, you or your child?’”

Despite being raised in the era when adoptive families were told to just love their child, Goller-Sojourner said there were a lot of things his

family did right concerning addressing racial issues.

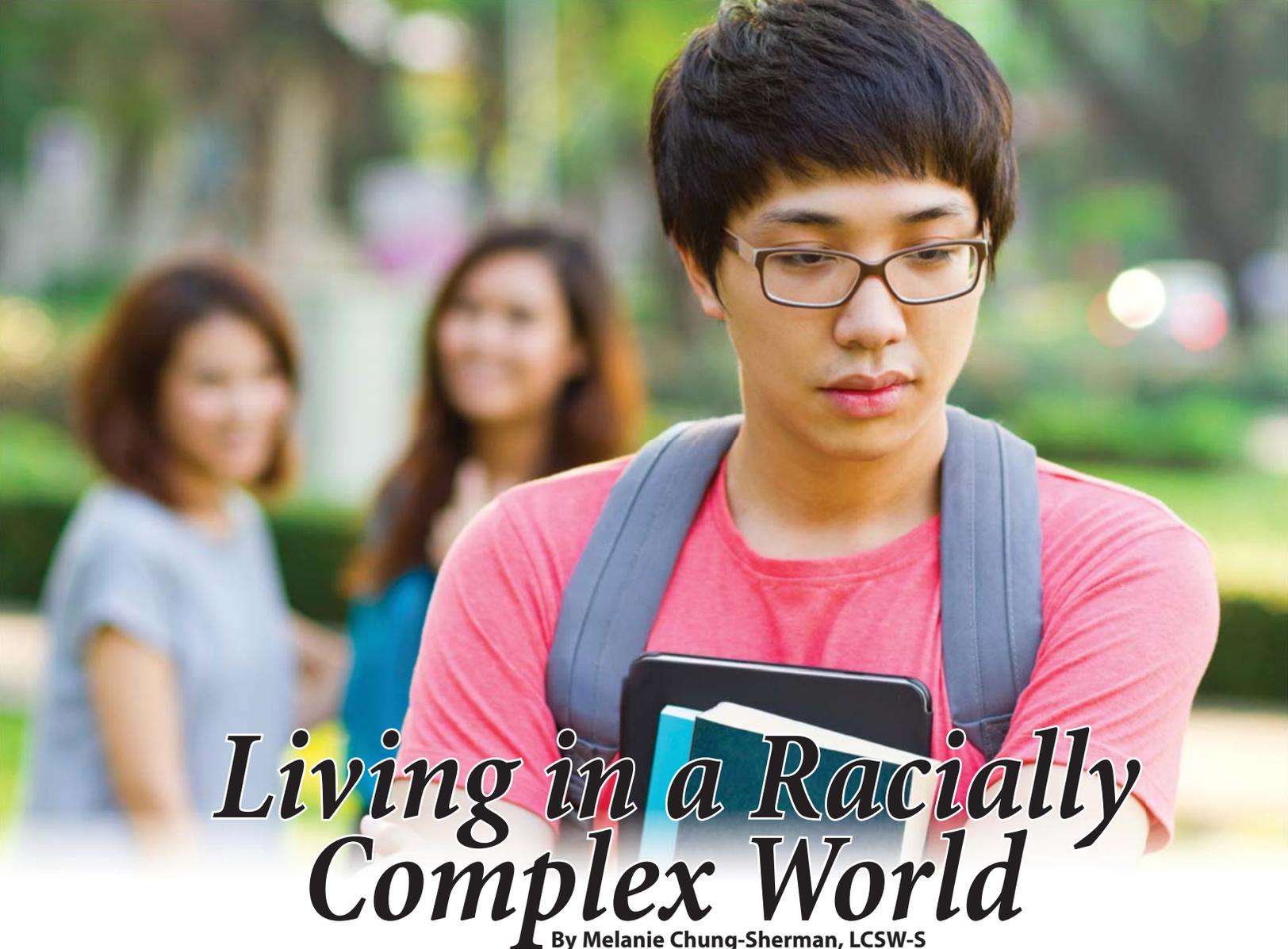
“We were the trials for this grand social experiment,” Goller-Sojourner said. “We weren't surrounded by black men at all. But I always knew from a young age my mom had my back. She never minimized it.”

Goller-Sojourner even lived in Africa for three years of his childhood. And Goller-Sojourner said his parents were intentional about adopting three minority race children so they would all be able to relate to one another. That experience is something that Goller-Sojourner said makes him uniquely qualified to launch Transracial Family Coaching.

“There's things we know as adult adoptees, things only we know about,” Goller-Sojourner said. “We spend a lot of time in the valley searching for who we are. It's about preparing somebody for that so they enter adulthood a little softer. It's really about the kids.”

In addition to launching Transracial Family Coaching, Goller-Sojourner is also releasing a new book, “From Lutefisk and Lefse to Cornbread and Collards: Narratives, Essays and Interactive Exercises in Transracial Adoption.” For more information about Goller-Sojourner and his work, visit <http://transracialfamilycoaching.com>.





# *Living in a Racially Complex World*

By Melanie Chung-Sherman, LCSW-S

Shortly after the Michael Brown case sparked the first protests in Ferguson, Missouri, an adoptive parent sat in my office with tears in her eyes as she shared her concern for her son's safety. She shared her feelings of helplessness to protect him adequately. Her son was adopted from an African country and she was a white, single adoptive mother. Based on his early history of trauma, his behaviors were erratic and challenging for most adults who attempted to care for him. Yet, underneath these trauma-based responses was a loving, tender and intuitive child who lived through unspeakable tragedy before his adoption. She was already receiving expulsion threats from his school and extensive calls from the principal, yet his white sibling, who is also adopted through foster care was not.

When her son erupted into a temper tantrum at the local library, she recounted that a white man intervened by yelling at her elementary-

age son to get off "that woman." The incident rattled her and she realized that one day he could easily become a Trevon Martin or Michael Brown in his own neighborhood despite being adopted into their family. She believed they lived in a diverse area, but realized that her sense of diversity was not the same experience for her son. Not only did he lack a racial reflection, he lacked a role model as he matures into a black man living in a white world. She admitted that she was uncomfortable discussing race directly with her son because there were so many other issues they were dealing with on a daily basis.

In addition, she shared that discussions about race within her own family, which traced back to the KKK, were non-existent. There were portions of her extended family who did not accept her black son, but would her white son, so she made the decision not to engage certain family functions, leaving her isolated.

She shared that it was a painful decision, but one that she had to make when she adopted. Curiously, I inquired if some of his reactions and high anxiety might also be related to racial sensitivity in addition to his current special needs. She shared that she had not considered that before. Despite her deep love for her son, she lacked a roadmap to navigate race and racism — and by proxy so did her sons, but she was willing to learn. The vast majority of transracial adoptions are still between white parents and children of color. Though, this is not the case for all, I will be primarily addressing white parents raising adopted children of color.

We live in a racially complex world — and for too many people of color, it is a racially dangerous world. As a woman of color and transracial adoptee, my bones grow weary when I hear the simplistic phrase, "[We] have come a long way when it comes to the 'race issue.'" I challenge

that argument when people of color, or POCs, are disproportionately incarcerated and warehoused in prisons for longer sentences versus their white counterpart for similar crimes, it is unjust. When race is continually linked to vigilante justice and police brutality resulting in the deaths of Black brothers and sisters, it hurts. When Boston's Museum of Modern Art pushes a "Geisha" exhibit so that people can "try on" a displaced idea of what Asian, or "yellow face," it is demeaning. When NAACP's former branch president, Rachel Dolezal, appropriates a black identity, as well as a transracial adoptee identity moniker, it is viewed as fresh and nuanced, but the irony of the privilege that helped her obtain that position of power is negated, it is discomfiting. When the NFL defiantly defends the Washington Redskins moniker, a racially demoralizing term to Native Americans (and should be for all of us), it is exploitive. When #blacklivesmatter is challenged by #alllivesmatter, it dismisses the focus on racial violence and oppression of black lives as equal stakeholders.

When a person of color is told that they are being too sensitive — questioned why everything is about race — or their stories are deconstructed by others through seemingly innocuous questions such as, "Are you sure it happened that way?" or "Well, not everyone does that," leaving a person of color with a sense of inadequacy to find a counterargument for their own experience. Privilege is not having to actively acknowledge injustice or inequality when one does not have to see. Inaction and silence is not philosophical, it is dangerous. Children of color do not have the luxury to become defensive because they are constantly living in a state of defense. Outside a parent's proximity, many transracial adoptees anxiously prepare for intrusive questions about their race, first, and then their adoption status within their family second. It is one thing to be the parent who must hear and answer intrusive questions, but it is another to be the vehement focus of those questions.

Reality check: TRAs do not hear the PC terms "c-word" or "n-word" first. They hear the full word in all its offense and derogation. I consider those terms to be "main gate" phrases that sparks a TRAs awareness of racism. However,

it is the more subtle acts that wear transracial adoptees and people of color down. Unlike other children of color, transracial adoptees may live within a family who looks like the very people who let them know verbally or non-verbally they are not the same. Children of color begin to internalize that they are inheritably different than their white counterparts. They observe that their white peers may receive more smiles, eye contact, approval or get called on in class more often. Those experiences make it challenging for a transracial adoptee to actively go to their parents and discuss these experiences because racial microaggressions are insidious and subliminal. Those experiences do not come with a vocabulary unless they learn the words to describe discrimination or mature into adulthood and recognize what happened to them later. Over time, their responses may appear to be behavioral, emotional and attachment issues, but what belies these behaviors may actually be a feeling of isolation and alienation from those who should protect and defend them. The cruel irony is that at the heart of attachment is a child's ability to seek safety in a time of stress, but what if that parent, or loved one, looks similar to the aggressor?

It is inexcusable for adoptive parents of transracial adoptees to forego discussions about racial relations in the United States with their children. In an effort to shield a transracial adoptee from painful feelings or reminders they are different from their adoptive family by not addressing race, is to instill an unnecessary sense of abandonment as transracial adoptees are forced to navigate their racial status separate from their family. Yet, transracial adoptees know they are different from their families. They just want parents to openly acknowledge that difference, not hide or silence it. When adoptive parents share that their children never discuss race or adoption, it may not necessarily be due to indifference, but fear and discomfort. On a developmental level, transracial adoptees do not have the life experiences, words, or parents of color to help frame those experiences thoroughly and consistently. There is an expectation that a child of color will have the words and awareness to tell them about most racialized events — this can be true for more overt racialized events. However, when they are more

covert, it put a burden on transracial adoptees to both decode and identify a racial experience without vocabulary modeled for them. Without words our children cannot make sense of those experiences which will compromise their overall ability to accurately perceive and protect themselves. Transracial adoptees must learn to live in racial tension, and know what to do when confronted by racism and discrimination that is most often embedded institutionally within school systems, government, places of worship and others.

Progressive attitudes and open-minded thinking will not eclipse tough discussions involving race — for example, discussing racial justice while clutching a purse or briefcase when a person of color enters an elevator sends mixed messages. White adoptive parents must confront internalized and/or generational racial divides within their own family system, amongst friends, and the community at-large to protect their child. Transracial adoptees are afforded selective privilege for a brief period of time transmitted through their white adoptive parents. However, as they mature this privilege dissipates. A black son, who was once adorable and precocious, is now seen as the aggressor, calculating and menacing as he enters pre-adolescence. An Asian daughter becomes the object of sexual fantasy and lust in the eyes of men, particularly white men, called "Yellow Fever" as she matures. A Latino son is now relegated to "illegal" status and considered threatening to America's way of life as he reaches young adulthood. A biracial daughter is subtly encouraged to claim "a racial side," when she hears her adoptive parents talk so lovingly about their Irish-Italian roots without access to her ethnic roots, and quickly recognizes that white identity is more acceptable. Conversely, when a white adoptive father walks out of his home, he does not worry about the police being called on him or being shot for trespassing at his home, but his transracially adopted children may not be treated the same way in their neighborhood. Transracial adoptees cannot opt out of these experiences. They cannot change their visage, though they may feel white internally and respond as their white counterparts, but not recognize that the broader society will not view them the same way — or treat them as such. When a teen of color is pulled over by police or

followed by a vigilante civilian, they must know what to do to stay safe — and alive.

In addition, many transracial adoptees have complex trauma history and neurobiological impacts that have impacted social cueing prior to adoption that makes recognizing racial attacks more convoluted, but no less significant or impactful for that child. Professionals and researchers have deconstructed the impacts of complex neurodevelopmental trauma, but the topic of race and the longitudinal impacts of racism has yet to be fully integrated. Transracial adoptees and persons of color who experience daily racial microaggressions will have a heightened level of anxiety and stress when they leave the safety of their home to remain proactive within society. Due to past trauma, trauma responses may be triggered quicker. When transracial adoptees react, it may appear aggressive, disobedient, willful or

## **Know your surroundings. If parents are bringing their transracial adoptee to an area where symbols of racial hate or openly hostile responses to their child are evident or a known issue in that location, parents need to be proactive and aware. Asking will they be safe? Will they be safe as a family?**

“attachment-related,” when in fact it may have been linked to racialized situations. However, there may be less tolerance by adults and peers when a child of color responds. There is a disproportionate number of children of color, particularly black and Latinos, who are threatened with expulsion, detention and punitive discipline than their white peers. They will have the privilege of white parents to advocate for them in ways that their peers of color do not; however, their parents’ advocacy is only as effective as their parents’ awareness and proximity. Their peers of color may have parents and extended family who can actively model racial awareness, pride and safety. That is why it is critical for adoptive parents to be educated and attuned to their child’s racial experiences. To merely recognize racism and racial microaggressions within society is not enough, parents must actively respond. It is a matter of safety and protection for transracial adoptees.

Adoption-sensitive dialogues surrounding birth family, placement, grief and complex trauma cannot replace race-related awareness, but must be integrated. White parents can align with their child’s needs and become their strongest and fiercest advocate. They need their parents to actively champion change. This is a cornerstone in identity formation for a transracial adoptee. It is never too late to start this process — so long as you start.

The following are recommendations from transracial adoptees and persons of color when addressing the complexities of race. This list is definitely not exhaustive, but common recommendations to consider as a starting point:

- Recognize your privileged status as a white adoptive parent, in that, you will experience your child’s world through a unique paradigm. When you are with your child, the

world will not treat your child the same way. It is not an indictment on whiteness, but an awareness of what persons of color experience within a broader context.

- Become more aware of your personal biases and triggers (we all have them). What makes you uncomfortable? Angry? Fearful? Overwhelmed? What were the silent messages you learned about race when you were growing up? When you become aware of your biases, it frees you to be more present in your child’s experiences and less fearful. Colorblindness does not exist for your child.
- Learn about the history of race in the United States. Educate yourself about the historical racial struggles within your child’s racial group so you can better discuss these issues with your child and others. Find books authored by persons of color. Read about

transracial adoption through the lived out experience of transracial adoptees in addition to adoptive parent’s perspectives.

- Actively engage and befriend people of color. Children need a reflection of their race as they grow up. They should not be the only person of color within their family system. As a transracial family, transracial adoptees need to see their parents model engagement and active involvement with other people and communities of color. Parents need to be able to ask questions of persons of color regarding race and racial experiences to advocate for their child — and learn how to keep them safe.
- Recognize that in certain situations, in which your child is one of the few kids of color, that they may be uncomfortable, anxious or more hyper-responsive — particularly, if there is a background of complex neurodevelopmental trauma. Parents can both acknowledge that they are aware they are one of the few children of color — and then ask their child how that makes their heart and/or body feel? Be prepared to listen and act upon their statements.
- Know your surroundings. If parents are bringing their transracial adoptee to an area where symbols of racial hate or openly hostile responses to their child are evident or a known issue in that location, parents need to be proactive and aware. Asking will they be safe? Will they be safe as a family? Do other persons of color frequent these areas or would they avoid them? This still exists throughout the United States . . . there is a state law allowing law enforcement to pull over suspected illegal immigrants in Arizona.
- Consider your community. Living in diversity is not the same for living within diversity. Living amongst persons of color is not the same as living within relationship — as friends, mentors and teachers. Examine your friends (not just acquaintances), doctors, therapists, teachers and administrators, place of worship, political leaders, etc. If your child is one of the few of color, then consider moving to a more diverse area that will allow you to actively plug into the community, not just

live there. If your child appears like the people your place of worship “helps” or does missionary work, what message is that constantly sending to your child? No child or adult wants to feel like a project. There may be tough questions regarding moving to a more diverse ethnic and socio-economic area.

- Consider your immediate and extended family: Would you feel comfortable allowing your child unsupervised visits or time with a specific family member due to racial intolerance or bigoted comments? Would they be protective and advocate for your child when they are with them? Toleration of a family member’s racial comments about a minority group should not be dismissed as “that generation.” Your child needs to see parents actively confronting statements. When parents are silent — they are sending a message that the statement, “is OK in our family.”
- Discuss newsworthy events by sharing what you felt was discriminatory, biased or unjust openly. Sharing your feelings and opinions about a particular situation helps frame a dis-

ussion with your kids — and acknowledges that you see racial microaggressions, too. This begins to give them words for experiences. Ask them their thoughts. What would they do? Address what they need to do should they get pulled over, followed in a store, accused of an action they did not do, etc.

- Repair missed opportunities to advocate for your child. Once you become more aware, you can more readily pick up on those events. If possible, intervene when you notice a racialized experience, but if the situation is not safe for you and your child — leave the situation immediately. Discuss with your child soon after. Let your child know you saw what happened. Share with them how unjust, unfair, frightening or sad it was that it happened to them. Ask them what they would like you to do. This allows both of you opportunity to learn together — and lets your child know that they are not alone.
- Remember you are learning along the way. Continue to lean into discomfort. Racism and discrimination of any kind, is not comfortable

and should not be. These discussions are similar to building muscles — the more you do, the more comfortable and fluid it becomes.

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# Poverty & Adoption

By Michelle M. Hughes, PC

## *Poverty & Adoption-possibility vs. Probability of Temporary Circumstances* — Lots of questions and no easy answers

“Adoption is a permanent solution to a temporary problem.” This is a phrase often heard within the adoption community by those who oppose adoption, especially newborn adoption. Most often, it is referring to a mom making the decision to place her child for adoption due to her current financial circumstances of poverty or near poverty. There is an assumption that with time the poverty will dissipate and the mom will be able to parent her child and get out of poverty.

Of course, the vast majority of women in poverty raise their children and never even consider making a decision to place a child for adoption. The estimates I’ve read, as there

is no true tracking system for voluntary domestic infant adoption, is approximately between 15,000 and 18,000 newborn babies are placed for adoption in the United States each year. In 2013, there were 3.93 million births in the United States, according to the National Center for Health Statistics at <http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/databriefs/db175.htm>. The U.S. Census Bureau studies poverty and gives a general idea of the number of children living in poverty, albeit it does not break out newborns specifically. In 2013, 19.9 percent of children in the United States lived in poverty, according to statistics at <https://www.census.gov/hhes/www/poverty/index.html>. It is reasonable to extrapolate that approximately 19 percent of babies are born

into poverty. Clearly, the majority of those kids are not adopted, nor do their mothers even pursue the adoption option. Thus, poverty alone may not be the reason these mothers place for adoption, but only one factor involved in their decision. Other factors in addition to poverty that may play a role in the decision to place a child include lack of solid support system, mental health issues, rape, substance abuse or domestic violence. Some of these issues combined with poverty may increase the possibility of staying in poverty.

But even if poverty is the mothers’ only reason for placing, it may statistically be a good way to move their children out of

poverty. If a mother who has lived in poverty and/or lives in poverty wants better for her child economically, it raises interesting questions when others impose their parenting priorities or their past experiences on possible birth mothers. Perhaps a mother knows best for her child and should not be chastised for making her decision based on poverty.

Furthermore, recent studies indicate that poverty is actually likely to be a permanent problem. The ability to move out of poverty is being studied by political scientists and often the results prove social mobility is a myth to the majority, especially today as opposed to the past. It is a hard concept to accept as it flies in the face of the “American dream” and that anybody can pull themselves up and achieve wealth, according to <http://opportunitylives.com/review-our-kids-the-american-dream-in-crisis/>. However, low income families are far more likely to experience housing instability (frequent moves), household dissolution (including divorce), job loss, domestic violence and continued economic instability, all of which are not desirable for children. Not to mention that poor housing usually means poor access to good educational opportunities and safe places to live.

Equally important is the research by behavioral scientists that shows how poverty alters the brain and alters IQ, starting at a young age, including in utero. Socioeconomic disparities are associated with differences in cognitive development. It has been argued that poverty can be as detrimental to the brain as substance abuse. Dr. Noble, a neuroscientist and pediatrician, and her lab at Columbia University are researching these topics. To read more about her research, visit <http://www.apa.org/pi/ses/resources/indicator/2013/01/poverty-behaviors.aspx>. Of course, this research only raises more questions including correlation versus causation. Studies comparing children, specifically between adoptees born into poverty and raised out of poverty versus children whose mothers gave birth in poverty and chose to parent, could address if the move from poverty after birth alleviates,

### Additional articles to read

- <http://www.newyorker.com/tech/elements/what-poverty-does-to-the-young-brain>
- <http://www.epi.org/publication/inequalities-at-the-starting-gate-cognitive-and-noncognitive-gaps-in-the-2010-2011-kindergarten-class/>
- <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3034450/>

mitigates or neither in the change of the brains of the children. A study comparing the children of those birth mothers who lived in and had their baby in poverty versus those birth mothers who were not in poverty could answer additional questions on the impact of in utero poverty exposure on adoptees. It would also address some more current practical debates in adoption such as should potential adoptive parents be allowed to pay living expenses for expectant moms. Some have suggested that living expenses paid by agencies or adoptive parents is coercive to expectant moms because it makes them feel obligated to place their child for adoption. Of course, aside from fraud, in most if not all jurisdictions, no expectant mom would be required to repay expenses. But if the inability to eat properly or have a roof over mothers’ heads while pregnant proves to have long-term detrimental effects on babies’ brains, then the debate on living expenses is substantially more consequential to the babies, who may or may not be adopted.

Given that so many birth mothers today are already mothers parenting, one also has to ask does the additional child make the difference of staying in or out of poverty. For some moms, the ability to get out of poverty may be incremental. If a mom does not have an additional child to care for, it may make the difference if she can get back on an educational and/or career path to support herself and support the children she is already parenting. But in reality, it might not matter whether she parents another child or not, she may be stuck in the cycle of poverty regardless.

Clearly there is a balancing challenge between what is in the best interest of an expectant mom considering adoption and the best interest of the babies who will be born. In addition, the siblings being parented by these mothers also have an interest that should be valued. Whose interest should trump when multiple interests are at play is not an easy question to answer. Nor may it be uniform and in fact may depend on each individual family’s story.

Furthermore, there is a lot of research on the impact of parenting in poverty and the impact on kids. A PBS Frontline show gives a good example of the challenges kids in poverty face at <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/poor-kids/>. For decades, the United States has tried to counter these poverty effects on children with programs such as WIC, Head Start and housing vouchers. These programs have varying degrees of success. It is not uncommon for expectant moms contemplating adoption to currently use the programs designed to alleviate poverty.

In adoption, the number of babies placed from black and Hispanic women is increasing and increasing across racial lines. Poverty rates are higher in most communities of color. Furthermore, climbing out of poverty is harder in communities of color due to a variety of institutional reasons, not the least of which, is racist systems of housing, employment, health care, education and real estate, including both redlining and racial steering, according to <http://nyti.ms/1FN2CnE>. Race adds another layer when it is intertwined with socioeconomics and makes the “it could change economically” argument even less compelling.

These decisions by birth mothers to place their children so their children will not grow up in poverty raises other interesting questions in the age of open adoption. If people are less likely to have cross socioeconomic experiences, then how do families navigate in open adoption? How do adoptees navigate in reunion in a closed adoption? How do wealthier adoptive families understand decisions by

birth mothers living in poverty? Are these adoptive families even aware of the “science of scarcity” and how it impacts decision making of those living in poverty? How do birth mothers understand the choices of the wealthier adoptive families and what they may or may not choose to share with her in resources? How do adoptees understand their adoptive parents not sharing resources with their birth family? How does siblings who know each other in an open adoption but live in different socioeconomic circumstances relate? How do siblings compare their resources in education, health care, housing and safety?

Furthermore, the reality of poverty in the decision for adoption cannot be made in a vacuum without competing interest. There are many arguments that are made against adoption that also need to be assessed. One of which is the research in science on the effects of separation of mother and child and theories of attachment due to the separation. Read more at <http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2011/11/111102124955.htm>.

Some have been arguing for years that any adoption causes a trauma for the child due to the separation. And the theory of epigenetic inheritance: the idea that environmental factors can affect the genes of your children, generational trauma, should raise questions about adoption on future generations. Or perhaps it is generational trauma that is being broken by the decision of mothers to place their children for adoption. Of course, the transmission of trauma to a child via epigenetic inheritance would also have to include poverty.

Perhaps expectant mothers in poverty should be given the information to decide which trauma has more detrimental effects for them and for their children — separation or poverty. Perhaps each mother’s decision is so individual that we cannot apply any of the research to any of their decisions. Poverty and adoption is far more complex than one article and often ignored in the adoption community. If anything, the research raises more questions than it answers and certainly indicates more research needs to take place.

Of course, the fact that most women in poverty stay in poverty, a generational cycle, does not apply to any one particular birth mother. Clearly, women in poverty have been able to leave poverty. But dismissing poverty as “temporary” may be a falsehood for most expectant moms considering adoption and should be a respected element in their decision to parent or place.

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# Time to Heal

By Patricia Dischler

During the past few years I've been sharing the stories of many birth mothers. Each has a unique story to tell, each is based on love for their unborn child, and yet, I find in each interview process, moments where I wish I could go back in time with them. I'd like to take their hand in that moment they walk out of a hospital empty handed, and let them know it's not only OK to take time to heal — but insist on it. It's been interesting to me how we've come so far in changing adoptions from closed to open, yet the emotional process for birth mothers after the birth has stayed much the same, just with new reasoning.

It used to be that after a child was relinquished, those around the birth mother viewed the event as over. They were told to forget about it, put it in the past, and move on with their lives. Birth mothers were not given an opportunity to heal from the event, to grieve the loss, to process what they had been through. Now, with open adoptions, no one is telling them to forget their child was born, but in many ways all of the other advice has stuck. Because birth mothers can now reach out to their child's adoptive family, sometimes even see their baby soon after relinquishment, those around her are telling her there is no reason to be sad. She is told to move on, be positive, and in essence, "forget" that she just gave birth and also gave up the opportunity to be a mother. The loss is brushed aside, the birth mother often not getting any opportunity to process it.

The following is an excerpt from my book, "Because I Loved You," written for birth mothers, to guide them through this loss. But I hope all those in the lives of birth mothers will read it as well. She needs you to understand how she feels.

### **Time to Grieve**

No one expects you to drive home from the hospital, clear out the maternity clothes from your closet, put on a dress and go out dancing. In the immediate hours after leaving your child you will need to take the time and space you need to grieve. Let the feelings come out, don't try to be the brave one — yet. Find a shoulder to cry on, or do an activity that gives you comfort. For me, it's baking. I remember when my

grandmother died I baked enough food in one evening to feed all of my first cousins at the nursing home for two days — all 84 of them!

Some will tell you that there are a certain number of "stages" of grief and that you will go through each of them in order. Actually, theories about grief range from 4 to 12 stages, phases that overlap or tasks you must accomplish. Don't worry about the theories. You will find your own way to journey through this.

Your grief may elicit a variety of emotions: sadness, anger, frustration, guilt, shock and numbness. You may feel physically fatigued or weak. You may begin behaviors that are unusual for you: loss of appetite, insomnia, retreating socially, crying, dreams or nightmares. If any of these emotions or behaviors seems to take hold of you and not let go, ask for help. You may feel like retreating to your room and never coming out or let someone in, but don't. Let people help you. Be alone for periods of time when you really need to — but remember there are people who care about you and who are there for you (your counselor for starters). Most adoption agencies offer post-adoption counseling, most have birth mother support groups. Make some time to be with these people, they will help you to put one foot in front of the other.

Placing your child for adoption is an event that will affect the rest of your life, you won't forget it. You will always remember the pain of the loss. But memories are just keepsakes of our past, not the focus of your every day. In order to move ahead you may have questions that you can't answer that make you feel stuck. Voice these thoughts to your support network, let them help you find the answers. Here are some examples of the types of feelings and questions you may ask yourself.

• ***Am I the only one who understands how this feels?*** If you are feeling that no one understands how you feel, you may be right. This is an experience unlike any other, and only others who have been through what you have



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will truly understand your pain. This doesn't mean other people cannot understand — everyone understands pain and loss. But it can be comforting to talk with others who understand the specifics of your situation. I want you to know that there are other birth mothers out there who have felt the pain you feel — and survived. Find other birth mothers to connect with — your counselor will be able to help you with this.

- ***Will life ever be normal again?*** It may take time, and it may never be exactly as it was before, but it will return to a sense of normalcy. It will be up to you to discover what “normal” will be. It is likely that this experience has changed you as a person, you probably have grown in your maturity and focus. You may find you have ambitions you did not have before. You may find you have lost your desire for things you once wanted. What is normal is the tendency to want your life back. This can be helpful — and harmful at the same time. It is good to get the desire to go back to work or school, to spend time with friends and family again. However, acknowledge to yourself that you have changed. Use this opportunity to look at your life “before” and see what may not have been productive at that time. Returning to a bad relationship, for example, just for the sake of returning to your life “before” may not be a positive route for your future.
- ***Will I feel this way forever?*** No. Feelings always change, even when we don't want them to. However, you may get stuck in a rut. Depression is a normal reaction to a great loss. Again, this is reason to continue seeing your counselor. You don't have to “snap out of it” overnight, but you should work on a plan with someone to work past it.
- ***Am I dishonoring my child by moving forward with my life?*** You may feel as though it is a tribute to your love for your child to stay sad. It may feel like a betrayal to be happy, to return to your usual activities. This is normal to feel. Remember how part of your decision making process was to look at your own life and how it would turn out, considering how to become someone your child could be proud of? This is your time to do this. It would

be a dishonor to your child to make a decision to choose the chance for each of your lives to turn out well — then throw it away. If you have made an arrangement for open adoption you will continue to have contact with your child. Don't you owe it to your child to live the best life you can so when you meet you will be the type of person he or she will want to get to know? Moving forward with your life does not mean leaving your child behind. Your child will grow along with you. Your child is going to grow, change and live a full life — you deserve to do the same.

- ***Will I ever have a family of my own?*** While there is no way to predict this, I can tell you that there is no reason why you shouldn't. Falling in love, getting married, having a child, are all events that happen in their own time, in their own way. You won't be able to make it happen. If you try, which you might, you will probably be disappointed in the end. Don't worry about what is to come and focus on being the best you that you can. When you love yourself it will be easy for others to love you as well. Looking for others to validate who you are or to provide for you what you want in your life is usually just a quick fix and not lasting. Again, these are mistakes I made. I know it's hard to wait for a family when you feel it's the missing piece in your life. But love cannot be controlled or manipulated, it is a natural feeling with it's own time table and level of intensity. What you really want is not just someone to love you, not just a child, but the love of your life and a child who exists because of this love. Settle for nothing less.

**You may feel as though it is a tribute to your love for your child to stay sad. It may feel like a betrayal to be happy, to return to your usual activities. This is normal to feel. This is normal to feel. Remember how part of your decision making process was to look at your own life and how it would turn out, considering how to become someone your child could be proud of? This is your time to do this. It would be a dishonor to your child to make a decision to choose the chance for each of your lives to turn out well — then throw it away.**

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# Birth Mothers

## A Fresh Look at Post-Delivery Care

By Sharon Fox  
and Heather Finney

**T**here is a new opportunity to support birth mothers post-delivery. Historically the birth mother, who is the third critical component of the adoption triad of child, adoptive parent and birth mother, has often experienced passive treatment once the adoption has been completed. By incorporating after delivery, a three-point educational program on grief recovery, revising outdated terminology and understanding data on the teen brain and post-delivery brain function, adoption professionals can enable birth mothers to become emotionally healthy and impact society's perception of her value.

### **What is "grief" as it pertains to birth mothers?**

Grief is neither a problem to be solved, nor a situation to be overcome. It is the natural response to the loss of something or someone we love. We must recognize and acknowledge grief as normal and appropriate. Grief is not a sign of weakness or loss of faith, nor should it be a lifelong companion of the birth mother.

The depth of grief felt by a birth mother upon

the sudden separation from her child through adoption, creates an overwhelming sense of grief and loss. The physical intimacy of gestation, as her life supporting energy flows into her unborn child, creates a unique and sacred bond. The transfer of the child for adoption, added to the heartache fueled by other losses, such as her family and social group's perception and the pregnancy's economic impact, make grief recovery essential for birth mothers to become content post-delivery.

### **Five areas where grief can impact the birth mother:**

**Physical.** Outward physical changes are obvious because of the pregnancy, but the inner stress of loss is often revealed in other physical manifestations. Every organ of the body can be affected including heart palpitation, digestive issues, rashes and headaches. These may occur before or after delivery and are hallmarks of grief and stress.

**Emotional.** The birth mother is on a hormonal rollercoaster creating feelings which are intensified by grief. Recognizing and

understanding the causes of profound sadness, anger, guilt, shame, resentment, forgiveness and the trauma reactions of fight, flight and freeze, can ease fears and reduce stress levels.

**Spiritual.** This impact can be examined in two ways. If the birth mother is a person of faith, she may question her belief regarding forgiveness or what God's plan is for her life. The other spiritual area is the joy of living. There can be consistent joy without guilt, in the life of the birth mother who is content with her decision for adoption.

**Intellectual.** Anyone who has had a significant grief event suffers from momentary or periodic disconnect with time and normal thinking. Grievers report struggling with completion of routine tasks or recalling details. These reactions are normal and will improve over time.

**Social and relational changes.** During and after pregnancy, the birth mother may no longer share the same freedom or interests of

her friends. She may experience broken relationships with family, friends or the biological father.

Each of these five areas of impact should be discussed and explored with the birth mother post-delivery to help her understand her new life situation and to enable her to identify healthy coping responses.

### **The Formula for Contentment:**

There is a formula which is powerful in its ability to assist those who grieve. All four elements of the formula need to be addressed. Omitting one or more lengthens the recovery and diminishes the path to a healthy emotional future.

### **W2+ T2 = Contentment (2 W's and 2 T's)**

**1. Weep.** The tears shed while grieving hold elevated toxin levels. When someone says they have had a good cry and now feel better, it's really true, because toxins have been released. The only risk is dehydration. If someone cries for more than an hour at a time they can become dehydrated. They **MUST DRINK WATER** to ensure the brain is not deprived of the needed hydration to function normally.

**2. Write.** Birth mothers should be encouraged to write out their response to difficult questions from others about the decision to choose adoption. Journaling will also ease stress and clarify feelings. Handwriting, in cursive, uses the right and left sides of the brain and helps the brain to reconcile the reality.

**3. Think.** Anyone who grieves needs to think about how the event will impact their future life. Thinking about how this brave decision can be a positive turning point in her life can be empowering for the birth mother.

**4. Talk.** Talking to someone who will listen, without making a judgment, can ease the pressure of extreme feelings and establish clarity. Birth mother support groups with a facilitator can assist in this step.

Change the birth mother perception by simply changing the terminology. Several elements of society have been transformed from "secretive



and shameful," to open public discourse in the last 40 years. HIV and same sex relationships, are only two commonly portrayed on TV, in movies and books. Yet, the birth mother has remained in a "shadowy gray light" of public awareness. By using the terms "brave choice," when abortion is not chosen, and using the term "gifting a child through adoption," instead of "giving up a child for adoption" and using the term "unexpected pregnancy," instead of "unwanted pregnancy" we can transform the public discourse in a positive way. As we recognize the Internet's power to connect adoptees and biological parents, the new terminology can transform birth mother perception to one of honor, respect and value which can enable a healthy relationship bond to form.

### **The Teen Brain**

The frontal cortex, where good judgement overrules the emotional and risk taking portion of the brain, is typically not fully mature until the age of 22. It is therefore no surprise that statistically, most infant adoptions are from teen parents.

One of the hormones that is released at delivery is oxytocin. This hormone creates a desire to hold and cuddle a child. When a baby is not present, the drive to cuddle and nurture is confusing and difficult for the birth mother and may cause her to seek affection in inappropriate ways.

Finally, the challenge to the adoption professional is not only to ensure pre-delivery support, but to enable the birth mother through education, to transition into an emotionally healthy future. An emotionally healthy birth mother throughout the adoption process can create an opportunity to raise the awareness of society and validate her critical contribution to the Adoption Triad.

It is my prayer that each birth mother, no matter the circumstances of her pregnancy, will be upheld and honored for her brave choice of adoption through these educational steps.

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# Left Behind

*Children left behind in the orphanage pull at*

A little girl with a choppy haircut and mismatched clothes peers somberly through a barred window onto a desolate concrete courtyard. The stark exterior walls are topped with shards of glass, an added security to keep intruders out — or children in — but either way creating a less than comforting picture of what will never be a home. A plethora of adults parade in and around the buildings — nannies, cooks, groundskeepers, security guards — but none is there for her, every now and then she watches as a sworn sister or brother turns and waves goodbye, taking the first steps to their new future and leaving the little girl, Mei, behind.

An old soul in a young heart, she is captivating to watch as she sees me moving through the iron gates that separate her from the rest of the world. Her expression transforms, her eyes brightening and tiny bow lips curling in the hint of a hesitant smile. Though fate has taken most everything she holds dear, Mei still has the gift of song and when she chooses to use it, her voice rings out in a soft, pure melody that captivates those around her.

The seconds before she alerts the others are the calm before the chaos, my emotions teetering in the eerie first minutes of silence, instinctively bracing myself for the hard emotions this visit will bring, even as I long to be a part of their existence. Their need to be loved and my need to reach out to them brings us together, and Mei accepts me, not for the unusual color of my hair or the puzzling blue of my eyes, but for what she senses in me is

an intention to bring comfort and the touch of another human in affection and compassion, something she is only just becoming accustomed to but inexplicably to her, wants more of.

She runs out to meet me and others follow; first one, then two, and soon many little arms wrap around my waist or reach up to touch my backpack, anticipating a coveted treat being folded into their petite fingers, or a simple pat on the head or other gesture — any recognition that they are seen, acknowledged and appreciated.

Those are the memories of how I began my days volunteering at an orphanage in China, but many times they ended much more solemnly. For in addition to tending to what were sometimes emotionally or physically neglected children, I knew that Mei and others like her would know nothing but institutional life during their childhood. A myriad of other complicated factors would deem them unavailable for adoption and attach a status as ward of the state until the day they age out and are released into society, often unsupported and unprepared to face the rampant discrimination against those with no family or having the invisible label of a disability, no matter how small or insignificant.

Most adoptive parents know of the lists that hold the dear faces of children waiting to be matched with their forever families, but it was the other lists that haunted me as I walked the halls or stood at the bedsides of lonely

children who longed for someone to call their own. Lists that separated those who could go to public school and those who were taught in house, lists of those allowed to participate in field trips and those left behind, lists of children who were given enough to eat and those who were not, and most permanently hurtful, the dreaded lists of those who could be adopted and those who could not.

Left behind lists, as I often thought of them. That last list kept a constant tug of war between we volunteers and the administration to fight for children to be put on adoption lists and have their files sent in. A myriad of reasons could keep them off the list. Health conditions; even what we as volunteers considered a minor issue could often deter a child from being matched with parents who could offer him or her sanctuary in a lonely world. Other times it was complications of how they came to be a child of the state; especially if the institute held a clue of who had abandoned the child, leaving the case open for ongoing investigation. Yet again it was another situation; one that either one parent or both had relinquished the child voluntarily, therefore there remained a minuscule possibility of a future reunification.

It's hard to say what the right answer is, but from my inside view within the walls of the orphanage for almost five years it is clear that too many children are there who have no chance at being reunited with their birth family, yet no hope to be matched with a forever family.

# Lists

By Kay Bratt  
*the heartstrings of one author and volunteer*



Perhaps all of these lists would diminish with time if birth parents felt they had more choices when faced with the birth of a child with a disability or illness. Many times children are relinquished by birth parents in the hopes that the child they love can get the medical help their families can't afford. Other children who end up on lists of one type or another are relinquished due to the fact they are second children of parents who fall under the one-child policy.

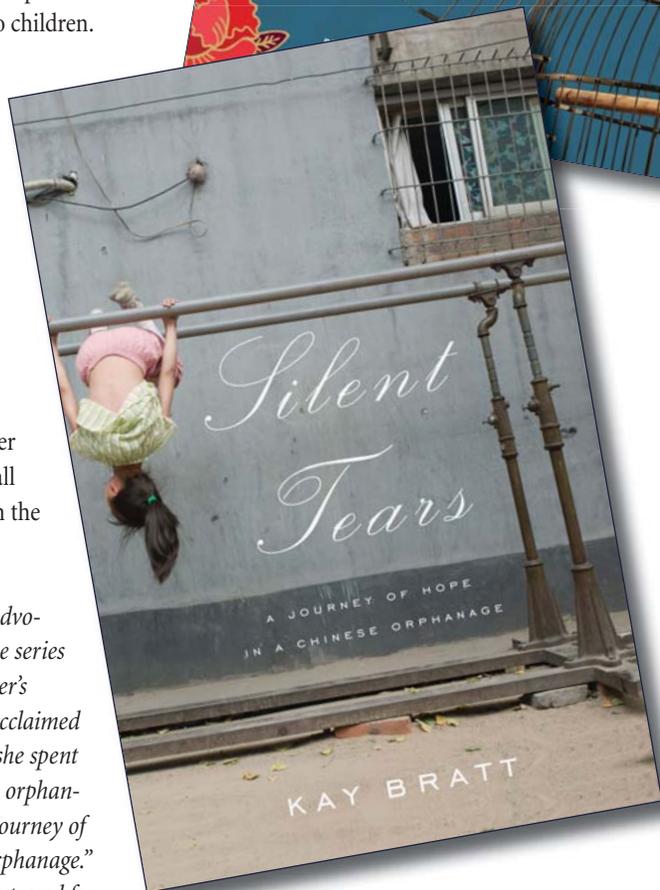
What some don't realize is that the family planning one-child policy has indeed been relaxed in recent years. The National People's Congress adopted a proposal that if one part of a couple has no siblings, they are now allowed to have a second child. Also couples in rural areas are allowed a second child if their firstborn is a girl. According to an article in China Daily, despite the fact that in 2014 more than a million couples applied to have a second child, reports show the expectations of a much bigger rise in birth rates were overestimated. Discussions are in place with the National Health and Family Planning Commission to change the policy yet again, possibly allowing all couples to have two children — a real possibility if studies show the projected birth rates will not jeopardize the country's resources and environment too stringently.

So could the one-child policy becoming the two-child policy be the answer to lessening the number of children in China's orphanages? That remains to be seen but as an out-

sider looking in, I am deeply thankful to their government for acknowledging that something must be done, not only to eliminate the rise in numbers of orphans, but to allow couples in country more freedom to expand their family to include two children.

On a personal level, I feel that if even one less little Mei who sings like a bird and stares vigilantly out the window wishing for something only she knows, is kept from the lonely life of an institution — and her name off any list at all — it will be a step in the right direction.

*Kay Bratt is a child advocate and author of the series "Tales of the Scavenger's Daughters" and the acclaimed memoir of the years she spent working in a Chinese orphanage, "Silent Tears: A Journey of Hope in a Chinese Orphanage." She has actively volunteered for several nonprofit organizations, including An Orphan's Wish (AOW) and the Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) for abused and neglected children. In China, she was honored with the Pride of the City award*



for humanitarian work. Her latest novel, "The palest Ink," chronicles a saga of two families in China during the Cultural Revolution. It is available for pre-order and will be released this month.



# The ABCs of IEPs

By Diane Wiscarson

**Each** child learns differently, but some children have learning differences that require instruction tailored specifically to their individual needs. Learning differences come in all forms — from struggles with academics like reading and math, to social, emotional or behavioral concerns. Public schools are subject to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, or IDEA, which governs individualized services that must be provided to eligible students, with their parents' participation and collaboration.

## **What is an IEP?**

An Individualized Education Plan, or IEP,

is a custom-made educational plan for each public school student found eligible for special education services. Every IEP must be individualized to a particular child. Each IEP should be collaboratively developed by a child's parents, educators and specialists. This article reviews basic IEP requirements, highlighting often over-looked and under-discussed areas.

IEP contents are easy to explain, but harder to put into practice. Each IEP part relies on the previous one, to form a cohesive educational plan. First, there must be current information about the child, including data and evaluations, which describe current needs and levels

of functioning. Current levels of functioning provide baseline data for current needs addressed in the IEP.

Once needs and levels are identified, goals are set for each specific area. Goals determine the instruction and supports needed, which in turn help define an appropriate placement. Each part is vital, and without all, a child cannot properly be supported or instructed at school.

## **IEPs, Generally**

Before implementing an IEP, you need enough child-specific information to actually write one. Parents know their child best, so should

expect to participate as experts when writing their child's IEP. Start by collecting information about your child. The district will have some evaluations, as required by special education law. The district may also have data from previous IEPs. If professionals provide services to your child outside of school, ask them to write reports or attend meetings. Information should come from as many sources as possible, and the entire IEP team should carefully read and consider everything.

The IEP has services and supports needed for your child to benefit from their education. This means that if your child needs Specially Designed Instruction, or SDI, for reading, writing or math, it will be provided. It also means that social, emotional or behavioral issues at school will be addressed. Your child could receive services from a speech-language pathologist, an occupational therapist, a physical therapist, a psychologist, a board certified behavior analyst or other specialists as a part of their IEP.

Almost anything you can think of that a child needs to benefit from his or her education can be on the IEP and provided by the district — laptops, assistive technology, psychological services, and even training for parents. The key is “need.” The district has to provide what is necessary for your child to benefit from his or her education, not what is best, or even what would be beneficial or great.

An IEP should sufficiently describe your child, the educational needs, services and supports to be provided, to be completely portable. An IEP should be written so it can be implemented in any school, in any district, in any state. The IEP components are reviewed individually below, but the order in which they appear on the IEP varies amongst districts and states.

### **Individual Components of an IEP**

**Cover Page:** When reviewing an IEP, start at the beginning with the cover page. Certain people are required to attend any IEP meeting. There must be a parent, a general education teacher, a special education teacher and a district representative. The district representative must have knowledge and authority to

make decisions and commit resources on the district's behalf. Others may be required, depending on specific circumstances. Make sure the required people attend the entire meeting and all are documented on the IEP cover page. It is possible to excuse certain people, but it must be done with the parent's permission, before the meeting, and in writing.

Parents also have the right to bring anyone to an IEP meeting who has knowledge of the child or his or her disability, including an attorney or advocate. Be sure to let the district know in advance. This is especially important when bringing an attorney, because the district will likely cancel the meeting if they are not told in advance.

**Special Factors:** Evaluate whether the student needs assistive technology devices or services, has communication needs, or behaviors that impede learning. This includes behaviors that are disruptive, but do not need to be. The behaviors also include things like shutting down in class, hiding in the bathroom to avoid work or peers, or truancy. If the child has assistive technology, communication or behavior needs, those must be addressed elsewhere in the IEP.

Discuss whether the student is limited English proficient and whether native language assessments are needed. Finally, note whether the student is blind, visually impaired, deaf or hard of hearing. The IEP must explain communication and language needs. There must be opportunities for the student to have direct interaction with peers and staff in the student's communication mode.

### **Present Levels of Academic Achievement and Functional Performance**

**(Present Levels):** Present Levels are the IEP foundation, giving a clear picture of the student to any reader. Present Levels should identify strengths and needs as determined through all sources of information be considered, whether from teachers, parents, the student, school evaluations or private provider reports. All needs identified in the Present Levels must be addressed elsewhere in the IEP, whether in the goals, as accommodations, as related services or somewhere else.

Student strengths should be concrete, not “Alex is a nice boy who is always smiling.” An informative strength would be, “Michael is very good at learning routines with explicit and repetitive instruction. Once he has learned a routine, he can independently complete each step in sequence.”

Parent concerns are any concern related to enhancing the education of the child. The IEP team must discuss and address each parent concern. Vague concerns like “the parents hope Zoe makes progress at school” do not help inform the IEP. A concrete statement such as, “Kira's parents are worried when there is a substitute teacher since Kira does not do well with new people and that unexpected change can trigger Kira's anxiety.” This concern is something that can be addressed in a tangible way on an IEP.

### **The Present Level of Academic Performance**

should be current data or curriculum based measurements and should include recent state or district-wide testing results. When a student need is identified, it is important to also have baseline data on a student's current performance. That baseline data will guide writing IEP goals and objectives later in the IEP. Statements like, “Steve is performing well below grade level in all areas and cannot pass any assessments unless everything is read aloud to him and he is paying attention, which he does not usually do.” A specific statement like, “Cassie's reading comprehension level is at 5.9 grade level, and she can read 90 correct words per minute using 6th grade materials” provides clear information and baseline data.

### **The Present Level of Developmental and Functional Performance**

includes everything else, except academics, such as social skills, emotional concerns, behavior issues and any potential related service area such as communication, occupational therapy or other area. Every area of a child's need should be here. There should be current information, which will serve as baseline data, for every area where there will be SDI or a related service provided. The need and rationale for supplementary aids/services, accommodations and modifications should also be here.

“McKenna has no idea how to be safe in the community” does not provide good information from which to design services and supports for a student. An appropriate statement would be, “Lyle will learn community safety skills, beginning with how to calmly state his name and telephone number, which he cannot do at all (baseline 0 percent).”

**The Present Levels** must also discuss how the student’s disability affects involvement and progress in the general education curriculum. Stating, “Cassie’s health issues cause her to be absent frequently” does not provide specific or usable information. However, these two statements together provide the information needed to inform the IEP team. “Lindy has an Intellectual Disability, and is unable to process and comprehend materials at the same rate and depth as her peers. As a result, the general education curriculum must be modified to her instructional level in order for her to participate in the general education class.”

**Transition Services** must be provided if the child will be 16 years old any time during the life of the IEP. There must be a statement of the student’s preferences, needs, interests and results of any age-appropriate transition assessments. “Christine may attend community college, so she will take high school classes and hopefully get a diploma” is too general and gives no real information. “Bud was interviewed about his future plans using the TPI, or Transition Planning Inventory. Results show Bud needs to learn about employment, how to find a job, the skills required for different jobs, and how to keep a job once hired. Also, Bud did not know that job applications are usually required, or that he could not set his own wage. The TPI further indicated Bud planned to take public transportation to work, but did not know how to take the bus or who to ask. Bud’s only stated interest was testing and designing video games, a job he thought was easy to find.” Although wordy, this is an informative transition section.

Be careful of the “does not qualify for this service” trap. Once a student is eligible for special education services under any disability category, all needs must be addressed. A student does not need to independently “qualify” for

each type of service — like occupational or speech language therapy.

**Participation in Statewide / Districtwide Assessment:** Be sure to ask what assessments will be given to your child during the life of the IEP. Look at each academic area separately, and document all accommodations necessary for the student, even if offered to every student. Know that if a student will later need extra time on a national test like the ACT or SAT, the student must have a history of having that accommodation for testing. The IEP provides that documentation and history over the long term.

**Measurable Annual Goals and Short-Term Objectives:** Annual Goals are just that — what is hoped to be achieved in a year’s time, with measurable criteria, in each specific area. Each goal should correspond to a need identified in the Present Levels. Each goal should also have baseline data in the Present Levels. Why is this important? Districts are required to regularly report a student’s progress to parents on IEP goals and objectives. It is virtually impossible to report whether a student is making progress if you do not know where the student’s skill was in a particular area before the special education services started.

**Not all IEPs have Short-Term Objectives.** However, if an IEP does have Short-Term Objectives for any of the Annual Goals, they must be linked together. The Short-Term Objectives are the building blocks to reaching the targeted Annual Goal. Every goal or objective requires two data points somewhere in the IEP. Baseline data is the starting data point for any goal or objective, usually in the Present Levels. The criteria for meeting a Measurable Annual Goal is the second data point.

Goals and objectives must be defined and measurable. State exactly how and when each will be measured. Anecdotal information is generally not enough, and it is important to see the word “data” somewhere in the measurement process. State who will do what, under what conditions, and to what degree, including the level of support that will be provided to the student when the goal is measured. “Elizabeth will improve her reading

comprehension skills from a 5.3 grade level to a 6.5 grade level” provides baseline data where the student is starting and the goal to try to reach.

Watch out for “roll-over” goals. These are goals that don’t change from one year to the next. If the child has not made progress and the same goal is still needed, something is wrong, and there must be a change. If the same goal is still needed, then the student needs different instruction, more instruction, a different instructor or something else. Leaving the same goals, with the same instruction, makes no sense.

Make sure that the goal states how progress is reported to the parents. These are generally “check boxes” on the IEP, but must state how the parents will be informed of progress (i.e., writing), how often (i.e., monthly), and how the progress will be measured. Make sure that the progress is being measured by data, not just observations or anecdotal information, which are too subjective. Avoid vague and uninformative progress statements like, “Elizabeth is working on this goal, with slow progress.” An informative progress note might read, “Kevin’s reading comprehension has increased this term from a 4.5 to a 4.8 grade level.”

**Specially Designed Instruction:** SDI is the amount of instruction your child will receive in each area of need. For each Annual Goals on the IEP, there must be corresponding SDI on the Service Summary Page. Generally, the amount of SDI is the amount of time each goal or goal area will be worked on. This is an educated guess, but it must be individualized. For each area of SDI, there must be an amount of time the area of need will be worked on (daily, weekly or monthly), by whom, and where the instruction will take place. A good example would be, “Reading Comprehension, 60 minutes each day, in the resource room, by a special education teacher.” This is explanatory and accurately informs a parent.

Students do not have to “qualify” for each individual service, as parents are sometimes told. There is a difference between the criteria for eligibility for special education services

and the right to receive services. Once a child is eligible for special education services, ALL of the child's needs at school must be met. No exceptions allowed.

**Related Services:** A Related Service is something necessary to allow a child to benefit from SDI. Related services frequently found on IEPs are speech-language, occupational therapy, psychological, transportation and physical therapy. If the related service is intended to increase a child's skills, then there must be a corresponding Annual Goal.

Transportation is a related service and should always be listed if it will be provided by the district. Whether "transportation" needs an Annual Goal depends on the purpose of providing transportation. If the related service is simply to transport the child to school, no Annual Goal is required. However, if transportation is being used as a method to entice a child to attend school and thus increase attendance, an Annual Goal would be required.

**Accommodations and Modifications:** This is probably the most misunderstood area of IEPs. Accommodations change the presentation, setting, timing of and/or response to curriculum and/or instruction. They are designed to provide the student access to curriculum and instruction. Accommodations do not alter the assignment content level or evaluation of the student, and the student must still demonstrate mastery of core content.

Modifications change the level and/or content of the curriculum, and generally result in modified grades. Modified grades sometimes result in a modified diploma, but this varies

from state to state. Again, modification must be individualized to each child.

Is it an accommodation or modification? Assume the math class is studying double-digit multiplication. The homework assigned is 50 double-digit multiplication problems. For Lidia, who processes information slowly but can do the work, an accommodation might be that Lidia only has to do 20 of the assigned homework problems. She would demonstrate the same level of mastery with fewer problems. For Christine, who really struggles with math and is still learning basic multiplication, her homework might be to do 50 single-digit math problems. Christine has a modification because she is not doing the same level of work as the other peers in her class.

**Supports for School Personnel:** This section is often overlooked and rarely discussed, but important. Staff supports needed to implement the IEP are listed here. If the child spends any time in a general education class, consultation between the general and special education teachers is needed. Talk about whether disability specific training is needed for staff who will work with the child. Decide if child specific training is needed for staff — particularly educational assistants. If related service providers likely provide consultation to special and/or general education staff, it should also be documented.

**Nonparticipation Justification:** State clearly how much time the student will be removed from participating with regular education peers in the regular classroom and other non-academic activities. This should include clear reasoning for the child's removal. Most

importantly, the amount of time should not be based on the school schedule, but on a child's individual needs.

**Extended School Year (ESY) Services:** This is the most overlooked and ignored part of the IEP, as these are services that are provided by the district during the summer. A computer program for writing IEPs that automatically checks the ESY box as "no" is a red flag. ESY requires an actual IEP team discussion and should generally be a data driven decision. If a child is to receive ESY services, the type and amount should also be individualized, and listed separately on the IEP.

**Placement:** Generally, at least two placements must be considered, and any placement the parent(s) proposes must be discussed. Your child is entitled to placement with the most general education curriculum and the most time with general education peers, that can be successful, with interventions and supports.

**Summary:** An IEP is your child's educational service roadmap, and you are an expert driver. Collect all the information you can, then participate and collaborate on the IEP team to develop the most appropriate plan for your child!

*Author Diane Wiscarson worked her way through the IEP system for her son, and in so doing, found her passion for helping other families navigate special education and the law. Since graduating from law school and founding Wiscarson Law almost 20 years ago, she has helped more than 2,500 Oregon and Washington families obtain appropriate services and placements from the region's public school districts.*



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# Torn Between Adoption Agency and the Birth Mother

By Lisa Cooper

***Q. I recently received a phone call from a birth family searcher telling me that the baby girl I relinquished almost 30 years ago was looking for me. I was shocked and emotional at the same time. I hear about people reuniting all the time in the media and honestly never thought that I would ever get that experience. Mainly because the adoption agency my parents took me to adamantly told me and my parents that I would never see my baby girl again and I needed to go on with my life. The social worker was strict and her tone was harsh. She seemed like she was punishing me for getting pregnant. That conversation with the social worker was embedded in my 16-year-old brain and I whole-heartily believed that I would never see her again. Eventually I was able to keep the memory of my baby girl in my heart and continue my life. I was wondering is this normal practice for an adoption agency to tell a young mother this? — JoAnne in Richmond, Virginia***

**A.** Knowing a few social workers myself, they are given a strict script to follow and to advise the young women who relinquish their babies. They have to follow the law and their agency's guidelines. It's more of their way of trying to reassure you that you're making the right decision and they want to encourage you to "move on" with your life. The woman who told you that so many years ago probably didn't mean to seem so harsh. She obviously impacted you to the point that you believed that you would never see your child again, let alone get a phone call in regards to her searching for you. Either way adoption agency practices have changed drastically.

One of my favorite books is titled "Adoption Nation" by Adam Pertman. I'd like to quote one of my favorite passages

of the book. "After a long period of warning tremors, adoption is 'changing' like a simmering volcano changes when it can no longer contain its explosive energy. It erupts. The hot lava flows from its soul, permanently reshaping not only the mountain itself but also every inch of landscape it touches. The new earth becomes more fertile, richer in color. The sensation of watching the transformation, of being a part of it, is an awesome amalgam of anxiety and exhilaration. The metamorphosis itself is breathtaking. Before our eyes, in our homes and schools and media and workplaces, America is forever changing adoption even as adoption is forever changing America."

I quote Pertman because I think it's important for you to know that not all adoption agencies treat young mothers the way you were treated but some probably did. My point is you have your daughter in your life now, enjoy the time you have from this point forward not the past.

"You can clutch the past so tightly to your chest that it leaves your arms too full to embrace the present." — Jan Glidewell

***Q. I was told by the adoption agency that my son would never be able to find me. I was protected. I could forget about him, move on, get married and have another child if that was what I wanted. They stressed to me that it was for the best interest of the child. I apologize to anyone I may offend by saying this, but I felt it was in my best interest to forget about him and make a life for myself. I had the world in my hands; I was going to begin my last year of college then join the Peace Corps and see the world. I wanted so many things for myself. I never wanted to get married or have any children for that matter. He might have been a mistake, but it wasn't his fault so I chose adoption. I did what was best for***



Lisa Cooper is a Birth Family Searcher and lives in San Luis Obispo, Calif. She is studying to be a Professional Genealogist and speaks regularly at adoption conferences throughout the country. She is a member of American Adoption Congress and several other adoption organizations. To pose a question to Cooper, write to [thetriad-searcher@yahoo.com](mailto:thetriad-searcher@yahoo.com) or call 805-712-5010.

*me and my baby. Now he has found me after 45 years. I received a letter from him sharing his life story and even some pictures of his wife and family. He doesn't seem to want anything from me just had questions about who I am and who his birth father was and some medical questions for his children's sake. I guess my question is, am I really a bad person to not want to be a part of his life? What do I do now? Should I write him back? Call him? Ignore him? I am not a horrible person although writing this some people may think I am. I am just a woman who wanted other things out of life. I've had and will continue to have a great life. — Cindy in Great Lakes, Michigan*

**A.** Cindy, don't blame yourself for feeling that way. In fact, you should be proud that he turned out so great and you made the selfless decision to give him to a family who wanted a baby. Most adoptees just want to know where they came from, who they look like and what their history is. They really just want to read that first chapter of their lives. I would suggest you do respond to his letter, as he is probably waiting by the mailbox or anxious every time the phone rings.

If you can, write him a handwritten letter and send a photo of yourself. Answer any questions he asked and explain to him that you are not in a position to be a part of his life and explain why. He's a big boy now, he will understand. He most likely has prepared himself for whatever decisions you make.

Speaking from my own experience with my birth mother, I didn't want a relationship with her, I just wanted to know where I came from. I wanted to see her face and look at her picture and finally see myself in someone else. I also wanted to thank her for making the choice to give me up for adoption and make another family happy. You are a brave woman, don't ever forget that.

**Q.** *I recently found my daughter who I relinquished when I was just 16. Although I was told that I would never be able to find her and shouldn't even try, I needed to know if she was OK. I hired a birth family researcher and he was able to find her in 24 hours. I was not expecting him to find her so soon, but I was excited to finally hold her photo in my hands. At the searcher's suggestion I contacted her adopted parents first to see if she even knew she was adopted. I had*

*been pleasantly surprised to learn that the adopted parents had tried to find me years ago to no avail. They told me she did in fact know that she was adopted and they would speak to her about me making contact with her. Well, weeks went by with no word so I asked my searcher if he could contact the parents and see what was going on. He informed me that they did speak to her about me making contact and she now didn't want me to. I am heart broken. I guess my question is what do I do now? I just want to know if she is OK, happy and healthy. Should I contact her anyway in the form of a letter? I look at her picture every day. I have memorized every inch of her. I look at her children and I see myself in them. This is so hard to handle. I feel like I'm 16 again. Please tell me what to do. — Jan in Santa Barbara, California.*

**A.** WOW, this is a tough one Jan. But my advice is really simple though; I think you need to respect her decision and not contact her in any way. I know you don't want to hear that and I understand how hard this must be for you, but some adoptees just don't have that desire to know who their birth parents were. She most likely had a great childhood and is content with the way things are now. I have a friend who was adopted and she and I view reunions in a different light. The curiosity practically suffocated me, I had to know and she had absolutely no feelings whatsoever about looking for her birth mother. Jan, I know you must be devastated but give her some time. Contact her parents again in six months. She may surprise you and reach out herself before then.

**Knowing a few social workers myself, they are given a strict script to follow and to advise the young women who relinquish their babies. They have to follow the law and their agency's guidelines. It's more of their way of trying to reassure you that you're making the right decision and they want to encourage you to "move on" with your life . . . Either way adoption agency practices have changed drastically.**



# Adoption

By Gabriella van Rij

## A Gift That Gives Both Ways

### Advice for Parents Considering Adoption



**T**o all parents who are considering adoption, or have adopted children, I as an adoptee applaud you. I was adopted from a Pakistani orphanage at the age of 3 and raised in a Dutch diplomat's family in Holland at a time when multicultural adoptions were unheard of.

I am whole heartedly for adoption, but also know personally the struggles that come along with it. Wanting a child is often a desire to fill a void in a couple's lives. Before you move forward with adoption, put yourself in the shoes of your future child and — for a moment — look away from your own expectations.

A child often has no say whatsoever in this life-changing event. One day the child finds him or herself in a new family and must learn how to cope. Having biological children is already a huge task, but taking on adopted children, especially those from a different ethnic or cultural background, is even a greater endeavor — particularly when the adopted child is not an infant.

With preparation, you can successfully navigate through a torrent of emotions that go through the mind of the adoptee, particularly in the case of a multi-cultural adoption.

Here are a few observations garnered from my own experiences throughout the years

that could be useful for future parents of an adopted child:

1. Remember that expectations toward the unknown child are unrealistic as there is not yet a bond between the two of you. Take your time to bond. There are NO rules. Just take your time.
2. Encourage open dialogue on any subject that comes up with your adopted child, especially when biological children are already in the family.
3. Never lie regarding a child's origins, no matter how difficult the truth might be in your eyes. The child prefers to hear the truth. If the child was adopted when older, he or she already understands abandonment. It is the adopted parent who has a harder time with talking about the child's history.
4. A question that is often asked by adopted children that they do not dare to ask their parents, but which I am asked when I give talks at school assemblies is: When I was born did my biological mother give me a name? It is a valid question. It is one that holds a lot of emotion because, if true, then why did the adoptive parents change the child's name? If not true and they were not given a name, they will wonder why the biological mother did not care to name their child. Even though this is an emotional minefield, it is still better to answer as truthfully as you can to help your child grow and move forward in his or her journey.
5. Never tell an adoptee, "You are different and special and that is why I chose you." I have not met one adoptee who actually liked hearing that. Yes, they will repeat this because it is their only ammunition they've been given against questions, but like all children, they just want to belong and fit in their environment, especially at school. Today, in our increasingly multi-cultural world, it is easier for children of different ethnicities to blend in, but make no mistake — they often still get bullied for their differences.

6. Don't tell your child who comes home with bad math grades that this never happens in your family, or that you were never bad at math. It will set your child apart, as he or she knows these talents were not inherited from you.
7. Do not try to convince your adopted child that he or she is the same as your biological

**Mothers and daughters, fathers and sons resemble each other physically, and I had absolutely never had any comparison to the kind of connection that goes with resemblance. People who have family tell me it is unimportant that they look like their aunt or grandmother. But resemblance to a family member is something adopted children crave. It gives us a sense of normalcy, of belonging to someone.**

- cal children because he or she knows better!
8. Abandonment is an issue that they will deal with for the rest of their lives. Don't try to convince them otherwise; instead, help them deal with that void.
9. Racism is sometimes an ugly word. Adopted or not, I see it everywhere when I speak with children during my assemblies. And not only with multi-cultural adopted children, mind you; there are a lot of mixed-race kids out there with the same problem an adoptee has. It is important to keep the dialogue open as the child will not easily confide in you on issues of race, as he or she knows you cannot relate. Let him or her know that you will listen instead.
10. As a parent, do not get scared when your child, during his or her teenage years, wants to find his or her biological parents. It is a normal process for the adoptee to search for his or her own identity and sense of belonging. Be prepared to help and don't be intimidated; it takes nothing away from your relationship with them.

In closing, I would like share a short paragraph from my recent book "With All My Might:"

I had felt alone most of my life and had never been able to compare myself to anyone else. Mothers and daughters, fathers and sons resemble each other physically, and I had absolutely never had any comparison to

the kind of connection that goes with resemblance. People who have family tell me it is unimportant that they look like their aunt or grandmother. But resemblance to a family member is something adopted children crave. It gives us a sense of normalcy, of belonging to someone.

Remember, your future adopted child craves belonging — as do we all. If you navigate the various issues that come with adoption with courage, sensitivity and kindness, you will be doing your part to make your new structured family a place for your child to belong and thrive.

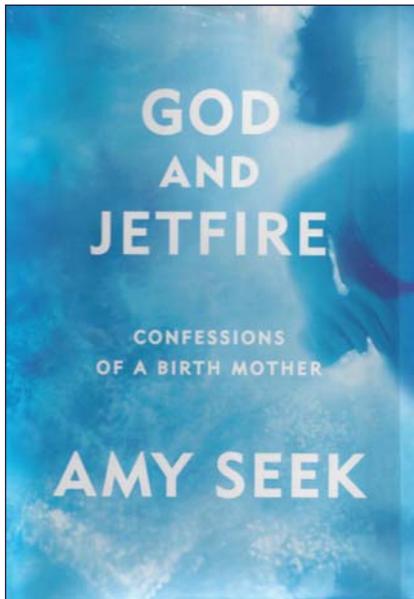
*The leading voice of the Kindness movement, Gabriella van Rij works to spread the message that we are all unique and we each have something to offer the person next to us. She has a non-profit 501(c)(3) foundation in the United States. She is the author of "I Can Find My Might," a part self-help, part practical resource for students, parents and educators on bullying and self-acceptance. She is also the author of "With All My Might," a memoir about cross-cultural adoptions. For more information about van Rij and her books, visit <http://gabriella.global/author>.*

## resource reviews

### **God and Jetfire**

By Amy Seek  
Karin Mitchell, 2014,  
ISBN 13: 9781499584776,  
224 pages, \$15.99 paper-  
back

Open adoption waters are some of the most tricky to navigate, and Amy Seek does her best to describe her experience with this process in her novel “God and Jetfire.” As a 23-year-old architecture student with many other things on her plate, Seek decides to place her son Jonathan in an open adoption. She chronicles her experiences from before his birth to when he is 12.



Seek describes the different feelings that she has surrounding every part of the process. From meticulously choosing a family to give her son to while she is pregnant, to the birth of her son, to the awkwardness of the visits that follow in the years after the adoption. She brings the reader through every emotion she has regarding, Jevn, her child's father too, which further complicates her life and confuses her decisions.

When her son is born, Seek describes the struggle she goes through about really giving away this child that she has carried for nine months. She keeps Jonathan with her for as long as she can before finally signing the papers to fully terminate her rights as her son's mother.

As the years go by, Seek finds herself continuing to struggle with where she stands as Jonathan's birth mother. She visits her son as much as she can and develops a strong relationship with his adoptive family, realizing that she gave her son what he truly needed that she was not sure she could give him when she was still in college. However, she still grapples with the idea of wanting him back when she is more capable of raising him and being able to do nothing about it. Seek continually calls Jonathan “her son,” but is unable to truly claim him as her own.

This novel is heart-wrenching and thoroughly describes the feelings many birth mothers go through when considering adoption for their child. A story of regret, understanding and love, “God and Jetfire” will leave the reader wanting to know the rest of Amy and Jonathan's story and how their lives continue to evolve.

— Reviewed by Sarah Townsend

### **Unwanted Truths**

By Tricia Haddon  
Matador, 2015, ISBN:  
978-1784621-575,  
440 pages, \$10.69  
paperback

Tricia Haddon's “Unwanted Truths” is a stirring, complex novel that explores the complex feelings and situations that surround Jenny Porter and her adoption. Set in Brighton, East Sussex and London, England, Jenny seems to lead a fairly normal childhood. As a young adult she begins

working for the government and discovers that she is adopted, and her world seems to unravel. She finds herself unable to trust her parents and feels as though she has no one to talk with about her situation.

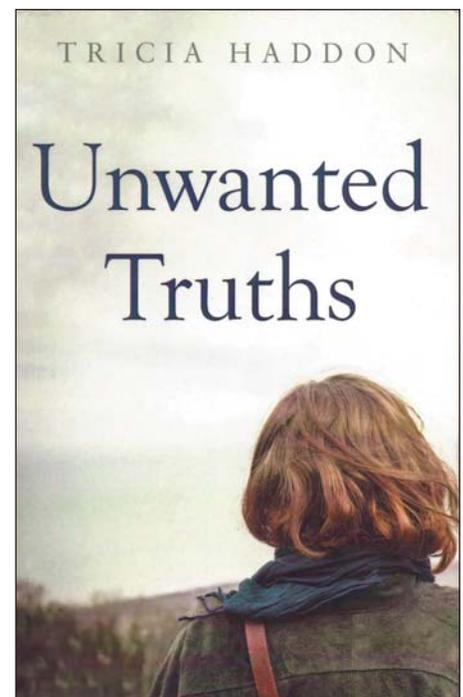
Jenny moves on from her initial shock and hides her feelings away. She marries a man whom she is satisfied with, but she does not love. She sees him as a sufficient husband and is willing to raise a family with him, but this does not last long after her parents' deaths and an unexpected meeting with a childhood sweetheart.

As the two rekindle their romance, both of their marriages fall apart. Both choose to leave their families and pursue a life together. However, as soon as they are settled and Jenny feels satisfied and happy in her life, she makes a decision to search for her birth mother. She is shocked and horrified by what she discovers, yet she decides to keep the truth to herself, just like her adoptive mother had with her from the beginning.

This novel lends a fictional take on the complexities of adoption, and the stories that come with it. Haddon captures the spirit of the time and feelings toward single parents, adoption, adultery and much more. She does this through significant characters, giving some of them a believable dark side to which many readers may be able to relate. Fans of romance novels will love this perfect example of a tumultuous love story, with many different unexpected twists.

Haddon has worked as a veterinary nurse, civil servant and personal assistant to a fabric designer before becoming an author. She also worked for an organization helping others find their long lost relatives. She lives in Brighton, and completed a creative writing course at the University of Sussex.

— Reviewed by Sarah Townsend



***In Their Voices:  
Black Americans on  
Transracial Adoption***

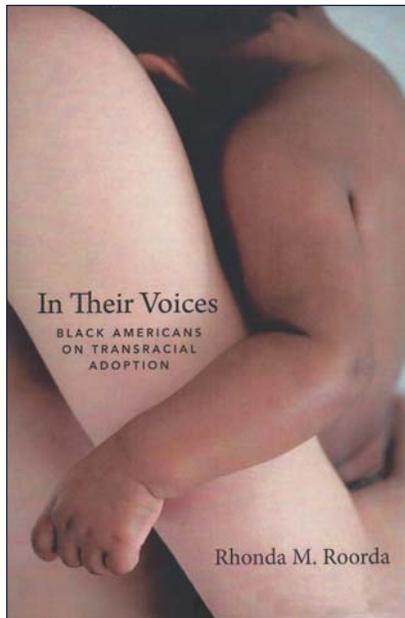
By Rhonda M. Roorda  
Columbia University  
Press, 2015, ISBN-13: 978-  
0231172219, 322 pages,  
\$27.95

Following in the footsteps of the “In Their Voices” Trilogy, Rhonda Roorda’s newest book, “In Their Voices: Black Americans on Transracial Adoption,” provides a starkly different perspective from her previous work. Roorda lays out the transracial

adoption discussion by interviewing a variety of black Americans from different eras about their thoughts, feelings and ideas on transracial adoption. From the Jim Crow era, through the Civil Right era and finally the post-Civil Rights era, Roorda provides important background on each of those timeframes and follows them up with in-depth interview with black Americans who lived through those eras. She addresses head on the 1972 statement from the National Association of Black Social Workers opposing the adoption of black and biracial children by white parents. She goes on to address the federal adoption policies, the Multiethnic Placement Act (MEPA) and the Interethnic Adoption Act (IEPA), focusing on where those policies fall short in addressing the needs of transracially adopted children and their families.

“In Their Voices: Black Americans on Transracial Adoption” is a fascinating read that puts together the historical context with the personal narrative of the transracial adoption practices in those timeframes. While an in-depth read, tackling many challenging subjects, it’s written in a way that allows readers to understand the eras and the impacts on a different level. Without the personal narratives, the book would just be another academic-focused history book. The personal narratives add dimension and flavor to the topic, pulling readers into the fascinating lives of those Roorda interviewed. From the first black mayor of Philadelphia to the great grandson of W.E.B. Du Bois and professional adoption workers to adoptive parents and adoptees, Roorda explores a whole gamut of perspectives. These perspectives frame up the true lived experiences of black Americans, some adopted, some adoptive parents and others tied to the foster and adoption community in a variety of ways.

“In Their Voices: Black Americans on Transracial Adoption” is taking the transracial adoption parenting level up a notch. It also provides much food for thought on the preparation pre-adoptive parents are required to go through versus what is truly needed to raise a child of a different race than your own. Roorda writes: “I wrote this book in the belief that



if white transracial adoptive parents recognize the value of learning about the historical, racial and ethnic experiences of black people in this country, they will realize that they have a vested interest in knowing and caring about the issues and concerns important to black America.”

Roorda doesn’t miss any punches in calling out adoption agencies, social workers and other industry leaders in discussing where federal policy and parent preparation fall short. In the end, Roorda calls to action, “Because MEPA and IEPA take a color-blind approach to placement, adoption agencies fear they will be breaking federal law if they prepare white transracial adoptive parents for meeting the racial and cultural needs of the children of color they will be raising... The child welfare system should make it a priority to provide services and/or financial support to families and communities trying to raise children in challenging circumstances.”

“In Their Voices” is a historical lesson in transracial adoption the adoptive parents shouldn’t miss. It also provides a deep look at the policy and practices currently in place in the child welfare and domestic adoption system — these issues should a consideration by the social workers, agencies and others working in the adoption community. Ultimately, “In Their Voices” is a launching point for implementing change in transracial adoption policy and practice nationwide. It’s definitely on the recommended reading list.

— Reviewed by Kim Phagan-Hansel

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—Patricia Dischler



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# Have You Ever Started a Conversation About Race?

By April Dinwoodie and Kim Paglino

Adoption can be a complicated endeavor, one that is most aptly defined as bittersweet. There are undoubtedly joys in adoption so profound they can at times defy articulation; at the same time, the gains of adoption are rooted in a fundamental loss that

can leave a person without the words to describe this divergent experience. When adoption is combined with differences of race, class and culture we double down on the complexity and the opportunity to evolve and grow as individuals, families and as a society. Today, as adoptive parents sign up for this experience, it is essential that adopted people, who are central to the experience,

adoptive parents who have come before them and learned valuable lessons, as well as professionals in the field, serve as their guides.

In today's modern world, we increasingly see that non-traditional families are the norm, the notion of a "typical" family having been replaced by a breadth of possibilities that add richness to all of our lives. The diverse families we see around us can be an excellent starting point for a conversation within your own family about recognizing and valuing difference. Although there are connecting points between different types of modern families, the conversations that occur in each will have unique components. Research conducted by the Donaldson Adoption Institute (DAI) supports the evident truth that race and ethnicity is an increasingly significant aspect of identity for

those adopted across color, class and culture. For transracial families, there are a variety of elements, both practical and intricate, that must be a part of the extended family dialogue and experience in order for healthy identity development to occur.

Over the years, more tools and resources have been developed to support transracial adoptive families. There is a host of information available, much of which can help families understand and navigate their distinct family experience. These practical tools include aspects specific to the adoption experience, yet also highlight the importance of understanding and responding to the physical differences that exist between different cultures and ethnic backgrounds. The seemingly simple task of ensuring appropriate hair and skin care for a child has a profound and lasting impact on a child's self-esteem.

We know now that it is also important for the entire family to embrace their identity as transracial; in doing so, it is critical for families to infuse multicultural experiences throughout their lives. Often, transracially adopted persons will report that many of their experiences of "diversity" growing up were limited to periodic "token" encounters instead of realistic and regular exposure to their birth culture that is authentically integrated with their adoptive family's culture. Families today that adopt children of color would do well to ensure that their everyday environment reflects a blend of cultures, and that children have ongoing interactions with and exposure to role models who share in the child's race and ethnic identity.

These practical steps are critically important

and ones many families today accept as necessary. Yet there is a need also to engage in a more in-depth conversation, both within and outside the adoptive family unit. Society today continues to struggle with racist and discriminatory actions and behaviors directed at people of color. These examples are evident in varying ways; in microaggressions, such as when I speak at professional conferences about race, class and culture and an attendant tells me afterward, an almost surprised inflection in their voice, how articulate I am. And we also see the ongoing racism woven into our societal institutions when we observe the overabundance of young men of color housed in correctional facilities or read of the high rates of poverty that exist among children of color.

These behaviors, on any scale, all serve to limit access and opportunities, and even more profoundly, to lessen the humanity of another person, by virtue of the color of their skin.

We must not forget that children, even from a young age, may experience a host of aggressions that have racist elements at their core. And as they grow, they will be exposed to the same news stories and experiences of violence and injustice that impact communities of color. It is critical to both recognize these truths and have ongoing and meaningful conversations surrounding both current and historical experiences of race and racism. Children who are being raised in transracial families must also be provided with examples of role models for peace, equality and justice both presently and from the past, within their culture of origin. Most importantly, transracially adopted persons must be validated in the experiences shared by members of their birth culture, and they must



DINWOODIE

feel supported by their family as they seek to integrate the complex experience of being a transracially adopted person.

These family experiences have much to teach the world about embracing difference and celebrating the richness this brings to our lives. I think about my nieces and nephews who have lived their entire lives with an aunt who is a woman of color and how this opens up their world in ways that may not have existed had I not been their aunt. I think about robust conversations we have had and how they see the world having had me in theirs. This one example is amazingly hopeful to me.

Our experiences as a community of trans-racial and trans-cultural adoptive families allow for opportunities for diverse communities to gain experience with one another in a way they may not otherwise have enjoyed. In saying that, it is vital to recognize that transracially adopted children and adults must not be burdened as sole educators of people around them about the issues and experiences of their original cultures. Rather, what is important is for an ongoing and

rich dialogue to occur, during which individuals allow themselves to authentically hear and share their lived experiences and are open to learning and embracing new ways of interacting. As we expand the conversation surrounding transracial adoption, this will include acknowl-

*April Dinwoodie is chief executive of The Donaldson Adoption Institute. Most recently, she was director of external media at JetBlue Airways. As an adopted person Dinwoodie is a fierce advocate for children and families. She created a specialized mentoring program called*

**Over the years, more tools and resources have been developed to support transracial adoptive families . . . These practical tools include aspects specific to the adoption experience, yet also highlight the importance of understanding and responding to the physical differences that exist between different cultures and ethnic backgrounds.**

edging and validating individual and systemic manifestations of race and racism. Starting that conversation, within your family and also in the larger community, is a critical step in creating a transformational adoption experience, strengthening families and ultimately society.

*“Adoptment” where adopted adults, or those who spent time in foster care, mentor to youth in foster care. She is also a co-founder and vice president of the board of Fostering Change for Children, a progressive non-profit that helps drive innovation within the child welfare system.*



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# Alternative Therapies, Herbs, Pills, and Snake Oils or “What’s the Harm in That?”

By Tatyana Elleseff, MA, CCC-SLP



**N**owadays, more and more unscrupulous or misguided individuals are offering fantastical cures to children diagnosed with the wide variety of disorders including but not limited to: Autism (ASD), Childhood Apraxia of Speech (CAS), language disorders, Auditory Processing Deficits (APD) (<http://www.smart-speechtherapy.com/why-c-apd-diagnosis-is-not-valid/>), Dyslexia and much more.

Here are a few examples:

### **Controversial Autism Treatments**

In 2013, Dr. Emily Willingham, guest writer for Forbes magazine, wrote a post on the topic of “The 5 Scariest Autism Treatments” (<http://www.forbes.com/sites/emilywillingham/2013/10/29/the-5-scariest-autism-treatments/>). In it, she described some pretty horrifying methods, including chelation, chemical castration and hyperbaric oxygen therapy, which purportedly promised to “cure” autism. For more information on other controversial treatments in autism click to read this keynote address entitled, “Evidence-Based Practices for Children with Autism Spectrum Disorders” by Dr. Tristram Smith for The Society for Clinical Child and Adolescent Psychology at [http://effectivechildtherapy.fiu.edu/files/pdf/division53\\_smith\\_keynote.pdf](http://effectivechildtherapy.fiu.edu/files/pdf/division53_smith_keynote.pdf).

### **Controversial Speech Sound Disorder Treatments**

Dr. Caroline Bowen, respected speech language researcher from Australia, has a delightfully edifying page on her website at <http://speech-language-therapy.com> entitled: “Controversial Practices in Children’s Speech Sound Disorders — Oral Motor Exercises, Dietary Supplements, Auditory Integration Training” at <http://1.usa.gov/1WfrcI3>. On it, she thoroughly reviews non-research supported practices to improve children’s sound production, including the use of oral motor/mouth exercises, dietary supplements (Apraxia Diet, Nourish Life Speak, Nutri Veda, etc.), as well as Auditory Integration Training at <http://bit.ly/1ERcJHC>.

### **Controversial Treatments for Children with Developmental and Learning Disabilities**

Macquarie University Special Education Centre in Sydney, Australia has even developed concise one-page briefings of a vast number of controversial treatments for children with

developmental and learning disabilities at [http://www.musec.mq.edu.au/community\\_outreach/musec\\_briefings](http://www.musec.mq.edu.au/community_outreach/musec_briefings):

- Issue 37: Cogmed
- Issue 36: Interactive Metronome Training
- Issue 33: Behavioural Optometry
- Issue 32: The Tomatis Method as a Treatment for Autism
- Issue 28: Fast ForWord Language
- Issue 23: The Listening Program®
- Issue 15: Weighted Vests
- Issue 9: Facilitated Communication
- Issue 5: BrainGym®
- Issue 3: Reading Recovery for Young Struggling Readers

### **How to Spot Controversial Practices?**

In her 2012 post entitled, “10 Questions to Distinguish Real From Fake Science,” Dr. Emily Willingham (<http://onforb.es/1NPNg6k>) wrote that “science consumers need a cheat sheet . . . when considering a product, book, therapy or remedy.” She advised consumers to consider some of the following criteria:

- Consider the source
- Determine their agenda
- Do they use highly emotionally charged language or meaningless jargon?
- Are they relying on testimonials versus evidence?
- Are they claiming to be exclusive?
- Do they mention words like “conspiracy?”
- Is their treatment promising to cure multiple unrelated disorders?
- What does the money trail reveal?

### **So what do pseudoscientific practices/claims look like?**

- People place heavy emphasis on beliefs and opinions versus data, when it comes to therapeutic claims.
  - Parents: “Who cares about your research this \_\_\_\_\_ worked for us so HOW DARE YOU question it?”
- The presented data is based on “expert opinions,” testimonials and isolated case studies.
  - “These ridiculously expensive ‘speech sticks’ at \$120 a pop worked for us, Yay!”
- Data is disseminated via self-published books, popular press, proprietary websites lacking research sections, as well as non-peer reviewed conferences.

- Treatment sounds like a magic potion since it works on a wide range of disabilities, appeals to fears and wishful thinking, preys on the desperate and uses hyperboles (“miracle cure”).
  - “Google, order, inject” (<http://wapo.st/1Pv8yH6>)
- New terms are created to mask use of disproven pseudoscientific practices.
  - “oral placement therapy” (<http://bit.ly/1C7JmE1>)
  - “rapid prompting method” (<http://bit.ly/1NPNlHl>)

### **Why do we keep believing when all the evidence points to the contrary?**

Because our brains become emotionally attached to ideas. This is further supported by the construct of two biases.

Confirmation bias — our tendency to look for/interpret information in a way that confirms our beliefs by “cherry picking” the evidence that supports what we believe in and ignoring the evidence that argues against it.

Disconfirmation bias — when facing evidence which directly contradicts our beliefs we will criticize and reject it because we do not want to be wrong.

So now let’s get back to talk about the title of this post: “What’s the harm in that?” (<http://whatstheharm.net/>) I wanted to take this opportunity to explicitly point out what the harm in these alternative practices could be, ranging from the obvious to the hidden. For starters some of these “therapies” could kill!

- Throughout the years there has been a number of reports regarding deaths from controversial autism treatments including chelation (<http://1.usa.gov/1h9npf2>) and GcMAF injections (<http://bit.ly/1Js39vV>).

### **Even if they don’t kill you they can cause some nasty side effects!**

- To illustrate, Nourish Life Speak Nutrients, which were prescribed to children to “increase their language output or to make them speak better,” were so loaded with vitamin E (way above the legal amount), that a number of children who were taking them experienced significant seizure activity (<http://bit.ly/1Jfy53l>).

### **It's going to cost you!**

- Out of sheer desperation, families spend tens of thousands of dollars on “alternative” treatments which are ineffective at best and harmful at worst (<http://nyti.ms/1I96Nd2>). To illustrate via a fairly benign example, here's the typical question that can be seen on a variety of parent forums pertaining to therapies for “(C) APD:” Q: My 9-year-old was diagnosed with mild auditory processing problems and ADHD, inattentive type. It was recommended that she do Fast ForWord. This is expensive — \$3,500 in the office and \$1,100 at home. Does this program work and is there a benefit to doing it in the office? I would hate to spend \$3,500 for nothing. The problem is that “systematic reviews found no sign of a reliable effect of Fast ForWord® on reading or on expressive or receptive spoken language” <http://bit.ly/1U2EVDq>. So where does that leave parents who spend thousands of dollars on the program in hopes of improving oral language and reading abilities? This leads me to my next point.

### **They create false hope!**

- Whether it's a placebo or the Hawthorne effect, or a desire to believe that something is working after you have sank so much hope, time, money and energy into it, it may look like ineffective treatments are working at least for a short period of time. However, sooner or later parents start to notice that the issues, whatever they may be, continue to persist or even worsen despite the provided treatment. To illustrate, let's take an example of a child with severe speech delay who is prescribed oral motor exercises to improve speech production. At first, it appears that doing tongue curls, blowing kazoos and chewing on bite blocks appears to work and the child's speech seems more intelligible. However, soon the parents may realize that while this expensive treatment is taking a significant period of time to complete, the child's speech production did not functionally improve since the therapist did not work directly on increasing the child's repertoire of sounds and words (<http://bit.ly/1fBAU68>).

### **They can create a sense of bitterness and hopelessness!**

- Ever spoken to other parents who have tried every alternative treatment possible and have subsequently given up? If you haven't, I assure

you it's not a pleasant or productive conversation. At best, you will hear a lot of vitriol and accusations, and at worst, they may actually start a forum thread or a website bashing effective treatments such as speech language therapy because of their negative experiences. When you believe that you have tried everything and it's still not helping, you feel defeated and lost and as a result tend to attack blindly anyone who attempts to assist you because you've stopped perceiving it as assistance but rather as just another scam.

### **They delay effective research-proven treatments!**

- The longer you search for and attempt to use these “miracle cures,” the more time is wasted and opportunity lost to undergo reputable treatment options.

### **They effect self-esteem and self-efficacy!**

- Now enough about parents. Let's actually take a moment to talk about effect of these alternative practices on the most important people in question — the children who are on the receiving end of it. Let's talk about all of the negative effects that can be incurred by them by undergoing these useless treatments time after time. And no, I am not talking about the dangerous treatments, which can cause physical harm or awful side effects. I am talking about the relatively benign treatments of “vision therapy,” “memory training” or others.
- To illustrate, I work with a bright 11-year-old boy with significant reading deficits and an extensive history of reading disabilities in the family. This boy's deficit is in the area of reading, there is no doubt about it. He knows it and is acutely aware of it. However, at the advice of well-meaning professionals he was taken to a behavioral optometrist, who told his mother that his issues with reading are due to visual processing deficits (despite the fact that his ophthalmologist ruled out any vision difficulties and declared his vision to be 20/20). It was then recommended that he undergo a costly vision therapy program in order to improve his “visual processing.” Guess, what his first words were, when I saw him in my office for reading intervention? “I went to the doctor who told me that I have problems in my eyes and that I need to stop reading! So I can't do any more reading

because of my eye problems.” Imagine how he will feel when after several months of costly therapies there will be no functional improvement in his reading skills, since the only thing which can improve his reading abilities is the actual targeted reading instruction.

- Our children are acutely aware when something is not working. Just like us, they get increasingly frustrated after being dragged from one professional to another, after “suffering” through one controversial treatment after another with no respite in sight. Imagine what havoc it begins to wreak on their self-esteem and self-efficacy (belief in own abilities to complete tasks and reach goals), when they keep undergoing these treatments without any improvement? All the negative self-talk they will use? Here are just a few statements I've heard over the years: “I am so stupid;” “There's something wrong with my brain;” “I am not good at this” and many others. Instead of building them up, these alternative therapies and treatments will not just tear them back down but may potentially cause behavioral and psychiatric effects to boot.

There you have it: that's what the harm is. The toll of these practices can be significant and can go far beyond the financial. So the next time someone utters the statement: “What's the harm in that?” consider the above information in order to make the informed decisions regarding the treatment for the most vulnerable parties involved: the children in your care!

*Tatyana Elleseff, MA, CCC-SLP is a bilingual speech language pathologist in central New Jersey who specializes in working with multicultural, internationally and domestically adopted, as well as at-risk children with complex communication disorders. She is a member of New York and New Jersey Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder multidisciplinary teams, the aim of which is to provide specialized services, including speech language assessment and intervention to children identified or presenting with features of FASD. In addition to being previously published in Adoption Today, her articles have been published in several magazines, including Adoption Australia and Advance for Speech Language Pathologists and Audiologists. For more information, visit [www.smartspeechtherapy.com/blog](http://www.smartspeechtherapy.com/blog), or find her on Facebook at <https://www.facebook.com/SmartSpeechTherapyLlc>.*

# Adoption TODAY CEU Quiz – October 2015

This is an “open-book” exam. As you read the articles identified below you should be able to answer the questions.

Either photocopy or tear out this page and mail it with a pre-addressed, postage paid envelope to:

**Adoption TODAY CEU Quiz Monitor, 541 E. Garden Dr. Unit N • Windsor, CO 80550**

Pre-adoption credits are not yet required in most states. Be sure to check with your agency of record to see if they will credit you for completing the CEU Quiz.

All responses must be returned by November 30, 2015 to receive your Certification of Credit for this issue.

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Learning Objective: to increase adoptive parents’ ability to apply and respond to new information and conceptual frameworks to their work with children in their care.

Please rate the following on a scale of 1-4 (1 is poor, 4 is excellent):

The information was informative: ( 1-2-3-4 )

The information was useful / helpful in my role as an adoptive parent: ( 1-2-3-4 )

The information was thought-provoking, ( 1-2-3-4 ) especially to story on page(s) \_\_\_\_\_

I would be interested in reading more on the topic(s) of: \_\_\_\_\_

## 1. According to the article, “Transracial Adoption,” on page 12, which of the following statements is TRUE?

- a. Transracially adopted children in predominantly white neighborhoods are happier.
- b. Children who are transracially adopted do not suffer low self-esteem.
- c. For most black adults raised by white parents, they report never having been in a room that is not primarily white.
- d. 30 percent of adoptions in the U.S. are transracial adoptions.

## 2. According to the article, “Living in a Racially Complex World,” on page 18, which of the following statements is FALSE? (Choose all that apply)

- a. People of color are incarcerated and warehoused in prisons for short sentences versus their white counterparts.
- b. Progressive attitudes and open-minded thinking will eclipse thoughtful discussions involving race.
- c. We live in a racially complex world.
- d. Children of color internalize that they are inheritably different than their white counterparts.

## 3. According to the column, “Birth Mother’s Perspective,” on page 26, which of the following are among the feelings or questions birth mothers may experience? (Choose all that apply)

- a. Will life ever be normal again?
- b. Why did I make such a mistake?
- c. Am I dishonoring my child by moving forward with my life?
- d. How can I hide myself so others won’t know.

## 4. According to the article, “Birth Mothers: A Fresh Look at Post-Delivery Care,” on page 28, which of the following are included in the formula for contentment? (Choose all that apply)

- a. Keep busy.
- b. Speculate.
- c. Write.
- d. Think.

## 5. According to the article, “Adoption: A Gift that Gives Both Ways,” on page 38, which of the following could be useful tips for future adoptive parents? (Choose all that apply)

- a. Never lie regarding your child’s origins.
- b. Don’t tell your child he or she is adopted until he or she is old enough to handle the truth.
- c. Compare your adopted child to your biological children.
- d. Encourage open dialogue with your child.

## 6. According to the article, “Alternative Therapies, Herbs, Pills and Snake Oils or ‘What’s the Harm in That?’” on page 44, what should consumers consider before using a new product, book, therapy or remedy? (Choose all that apply)

- a. How many friends use the product?
- b. Do they mention words like conspiracy?
- c. Are they relying on testimonials versus evidence?
- d. Which actor or actress is endorsing the product you’re using?

## 7. How have you addressed issues of race with your children and family?

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