

Helpful Tips for the Adoptive Grandparent

Few things are more completely enjoyable than becoming a grandparent. Grandchildren are one of life's joys, whether they come by birth or via adoption. All grandchildren are loved equally and are equally lovable.

When a new family member is adopted, share your excitement. Share snapshots. Exclaim about the traits that make this child a prodigy! And know that adoption brings some unique challenges. Following are a few suggestions for navigating once you find you are a member of an adoptive family.

People are fascinated by adoption, and this fascination can lead well-meaning friends and neighbors to pose very personal questions. Remember that a child's adoption story is akin to a conception story. It is private, and one should consult with the adopted person before sharing the details.

Think about language, and encourage others to do so. As an adult adoptee, I have heard this question all my life: "*Have you ever met your real parents?*" What this said to me as a child was, "Your adoptive parents are fake." I felt confused. As an adult, I answer, "I was raised by my real parents." It's a good idea to call the family of origin *birth family* (as in birth mother) as opposed to *natural family* (which implies the adoptive family is unnatural or artificial). Many people will have the best of intentions but use terms that confuse or hurt children.

If your family adopted internationally or from a different race, you have become a member of a transcultural and often transracial complex family. Translated into day-to-day events, this means you might celebrate Chinese New Year in addition to the traditional holidays. Unfortunately, this also means that your grandchild will be confronted by bigotry and will need your support and sensitivity. Your lifetime of experiences will be key in shaping your responses. Be wholly honest.

Remember, throughout, that your grandchildren are connected to you and to the family. They may not look a lot like you or your child, but they will develop similar voice patterns, talents, tastes, and interests. Don't assume the adopted child will automatically know this—it took me 45 years to figure out that I got, first, my dry sense of humor from my adoptive father, and, second, my ability to 'stretch and save' from my grandmother, a North Carolina farmer. Every Carolina reunion I attend reminds me that genetics are not the only way to pass on family traits.

At a recent reunion, I was introduced to my mother's best childhood friend. They hadn't seen each other in over 60 years. The friend inspected me closely and stated, "You sure don't look like a Haney." I smiled back, shook my head, and said, "I sure don't." I knew what she really wanted to know. But at that moment, I was completely my mother's daughter.

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