



Adoption

Best practice guidelines

Definitions

'**Adoption**' refers to the process of being taken in and raised by someone other than your biological or previous legal parent. It is usually a **formal legal process** that transfers all parental rights and responsibilities to the adoptive parent. The legalities around adoption vary through history, from country to country, and even state to state, but unlike fostering a child or assuming guardianship, adoption is typically permanent.

Types of adoption

There are many circumstances that could lead to the adoption of a person, and the structures of families with adopted children can vary extensively. A person might be adopted by:

- An existing relative or relatives, like grandparents, uncles, aunts, or other members of their extended family;
- A step-parent, or current partner of their biological parent;
- Someone they know, like family friends, godparents, or known members of their community;
- A foster carer or guardian;
- An external party, through a closed adoption, in which the adoptee and their family has no contact with the biological parent/s;
- An external party, through an open adoption, in which the adoptee may have contact with their biological parent/s (though the amount of contact can vary).

The laws surrounding adoption can also vary extensively from place to place, and some or all of these options may not be possible in some countries, depending on who you are. For same-sex couples, for example, there may be restrictions on the type of adoption that is allowed. There are currently (as of October, 2020), twenty-seven countries in the world in which same-sex couples are able to jointly adopt a child, and twenty-nine in which it's possible for a person to adopt the biological child of their same-sex partner.



For some adoptees, being adopted will be something they will have always known about themselves. They may have been old enough to remember when the adoption occurred, or their adoptive parents may have made them aware of it from a young age. They may also be in contact with members of their biological family. For others, it will be information they find out later in life, and may come as a shock to the individual.

Things to consider

The experiences of adoptees are not universal, but there are some broad topics to consider when trying to understand adoption and its effect on an adoptee.

Age

A person can be adopted at any age, provided the adoptive parents meet the legal requirements. This means that someone might have been adopted as a newborn, a small child, or a teenager, and it's important to consider that they may have lived their whole life with their adoptive parents, or they might not have become a part of that family until they were older. Each individual's lived experiences will be different. In some parts of the world, it's even legal to adopt someone as an adult, provided all involved parties give informed consent, and often on the proviso that the adoptive parent played a substantial role in raising the adoptee prior to their adulthood.

Race, ethnicity and religion

Adoption can take place within a family or community but also between people from opposite sides of the world. This means that an adoptee may or may not share cultural, ethnic or religious heritage with members of their adoptive family. It is important to be sensitive when it comes to intercultural or religious differences between members of a family, and to understand that a parent may or may not physically resemble their child. A similarity or difference in racial or religious background does not affect the validity of a parent/child relationship, nor does the presence (or lack) of physical similarity. A person who is adopted into a family that is different from their biological family's race, religion, or ethnicity may face invalidation from people who see the adoptee as not having a valid experience of their individual or familial experiences with race, religion, or ethnicity.

Identity and information

There is a common misconception that people who are adopted feel as if they are missing a part of themselves, or that they are all driven to seek information about their biological family if it isn't made available to them. This is not necessarily the case. Each individual adoption story is unique, and adoptees' reactions to and experiences with their own adoption is equally varied. While some adopted people do struggle with their personal sense of identity in relation to their ancestry or heritage, many don't, often not



making a strong mental distinction between biological and adoptive family. There are many non-identity related reasons adoptees might choose to seek out their biological parents, including medical history, genealogical research, or idle curiosity. An adoptee is just as likely, however, to have no interest in engaging with their biological family, even if they already have a familiarity with them.

Placement into adoption programs

It can be inappropriate to discuss adoption as either a positive or negative thing. How someone accepts and understands adoption will depend on the audience spoken to and what the means of adoption were. Individuals who were adopted by involuntary removal or state systems of violence might be less likely to respond positively to positive assessments of adoption. Inversely, for some, adoption could have been a neutral or fully positive experience.

Adverse childhood experiences and trauma

Adoption is commonly assumed to be an inherently traumatic experience, but this is not the case. Many of the potential causes of stress surrounding adoption stem from issues not directly related to the act of adoption itself (i.e. poor quality foster care, traumatic loss of biological parents, etc.). Each adoptee's experience is unique and how they process the circumstances of their adoption—and any other relevant factors—will result in varied outcomes.

Actions to avoid

This guide is purposefully broad, because the topic of adoption covers a variety of family structures, circumstances, and individual views. You should never make assumptions about how someone feels towards their own adoption, the circumstances surrounding it, their biological family, or their adoptive or social family. There are, however, some common pitfalls that adopted people often have to navigate in society, which can be incredibly isolating. To minimise the possibility of causing harm or offense, avoid the following:

- **Using 'you're adopted' as an insult.** For example, it is often used by children to suggest that they aren't 'really' connected to their parents. This can make an adoptee feel as if their existence, and family relationships, should be seen as lesser.
- Placing undue emphasis on the importance of being '**connected by blood**' or **family traits being 'passed down through genes'**. This mindset implies that family bonds aren't strong if a parent and child aren't blood-related, and can make adopted people feel like they don't count as true members of their family. This perspective can also lead to feelings of displacement, especially where the adoptive family is the only family someone has ever known.



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- Assuming you are **entitled to information**. Some adopted people are happy to talk about their personal story or situation, and answer questions about what it's like to be adopted. For others, it's a very private, personal, sensitive topic. Never assume that knowing someone is adopted means being able to ask probing questions about their personal history.

Resources

For specific laws on the types of adoption available in a particular country or state, it's best to look at information given by relevant organisations or government authorities.

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