

Letter To Those Considering Adoption

Dear Potential Adoptive Parent(s):

I am writing this letter to you based on my experiences as a recent high school graduate. This month, I will be 18 years old, a legal adult but still a young person with so much to learn and experience in the world. In the fall, I will attend my first semester of college where I will be a pre-med honors biology student. I have dreams of working as a neurologist and researcher at NASA who also helps patients overcome their medical challenges to live healthy and fulfilled lives. I am a person who came to my family by adoption and have a sister (biological child of my parents) who is five months younger than I am. She is my best friend and closest ally in the world. I have spent many hours and days thinking about adoption and how it has formed my identity and continues to shape the pathways of my future. I hope the following advice is helpful to you as you consider adoption as a way to form your family.

Adoption is a complex legal and emotional process that is lifelong. It is a way (among many ways) to create a family and can often become a defining factor within the family unit both nuclear and extended. Anyone considering adoption should know it can be a challenging process at times, yet it is also rewarding. I am an international, transracial adoptee, and I would advise those considering adoption to educate themselves on the process and lifelong implications, be prepared for the legal paperwork that occurs, tell their child that he/she/they were adopted from the beginning, understand that the meaning and complexity of adoption changes as the family grows, and that it is positive and beautiful way to create a family.

Before adopting a child, one should build a knowledge base and comfort level with the language of adoption in order to be able to talk to others and their child about how their family was formed. There are many ways in which families come to adoption some through kinship, some through foster care, international adoption, private adoptions, some are visible while others invisible – some are open adoptions with birthparents while many others are closed. Understanding what adoption is and all of the legal implications begins to prepare the parents and hopefully provides a foundation of how to help the child process their unique story that he/she/they will experience. Furthermore, parents should teach family members, community members, school personnel, and the child(ren) the language to describe and tell their adoption journey and what it means to be an adoptee. By adopting a child, the parents and the adoptee become advocates for adoption and should know enough to educate others on this legal process as well as how it changes across developmental levels from birth through adulthood. For example, young children often do not understand what it means to create a forever family through adoption; they only understand pet adoption. In third grade, I was asked by a classmate if I had been kept in a cage, like a dog or cat, before my adoption. To young children, adoption is confusing because schools host adopt a door, a block, a highway and/or family campaign events which further creates questions. Parents must be ready to address these complexities within their communities for their children. Additionally, one should be ready for a lot of paperwork. Adoption is the legal process of obtaining guardianship and parenthood over another human being. There are many steps that need to be taken before and after the adoption. Reputable agencies will help families navigate the paperwork and learn

positive adoption language. Also, the agency becomes a valuable resource over the course of the family's life for advice, guidance, and continued legal direction should questions occur for the parents or adoptee.

Another piece of advice I offer is to tell the child that he/she/they were adopted. Withholding this part of their story is not right because the child will eventually find out, and it creates mistrust of the parents and begins to cast a negative, secretive shadow of adoption as a way to create a family. The child's adoption story is an integral component of identity and withholding this information hurts them, and the moment of discovery makes them question their past lived experiences. Backgrounds and roots cannot be erased based on a 'wish' for something different. For instance, I had a friend in second grade who discovered that she came to her family by adoption. Her teachers and many classmates knew this before she did; she was the last to find out, and it created many problems for this child and our friendship because I too was an adoptee in her class. I would also advise creating a community where the child and parents can surround themselves with others who have a shared experience of adoption. Forming a community of other adoptees and parents fosters connections of a shared common bond and allows a place for adoption to be discussed openly with other like-minded kids and parents. The community of friends can be a place where adoption is not considered the minority like it is in most school settings. Experiences and stories can be shared freely with others who understand. Building this connected community is work and parents must seek it out and help foster the relationships in developmentally appropriate ways. For example, my parents and I meet annually with the same group of adoptees and parents for pumpkin carving activities at Halloween, gingerbread house decorating

at Christmas, and dumpling making parties for Lunar New Year. I have grown with the same group of kids for my lifetime, and I know my parents have also fostered relationships with their parents. Furthermore, it is helpful for parents to provide adoptees a connection to their place of origin. As the child grows older, he/she/they might want to understand some of the missing puzzle pieces adoption and separation from birth culture left behind. For example, I was born in China, and I am a product of the “One Child Policy”. In my personal experience, knowing more about my birth culture allows me to find ways to connect to my unknown birth parents and their possible lived experiences. My parents provided me with many books and cultural experiences with regard to China that helped me have a reference point for my genetic heritage and culture of origin. While there are possibly many unknowns in an adoption story that cannot always be known, providing a community of support and information about heritage gives adoptees a reference point that allows them to process their story.

Another strong piece of advice I would offer anyone considering adoption is to realize that how the adoptee views adoption will change as they grow and develop. Some days he/she/they might be sad, other days mad, or happy, a range of emotions can occur all at once. I cannot emphasize enough to allow the child to feel whatever they are feeling and tell them that it is ‘normal’ to have all of those emotions and many more – sometimes simultaneously. It is natural. I am grateful my mother allowed me to express whatever I needed to about adoption in the moment. She gave me permission to feel one way and told me it was okay but to be kind with myself and know that I might (or might not) feel differently on a different day, month or year. She was right, my ideas about my adoption shift as I grow, develop, and learn more. In addition, the parents'

understanding of adoption will also grow alongside the adoptees. My mom shared with me how her ideas about adoption changed over time too which helped me to normalize my experiences. At some point in my childhood, my mother and I set up a journaling system where we wrote letters back and forth to one another talking about adoption and a lot of other experiences. She allowed me to ask any question or express any thoughts in a journal that I left for her. She would respond back in a day or two. The two-way journal allowed me to talk about my birthmother and other feelings I had about adoption and school in a safe way with some guidance and support. I would recommend this strategy for parents and young teenagers as a safe way to communicate difficult and confusing emotions. Feelings about a subject can shift as more information is gained; emotions are hardly ever static in spite of cultural and societal norms about complex subjects like adoption.

In addition to a range of feelings that change over time, there might be some fears that adoptees have that never shift. For example, I have had a steadfast fear of losing my parents, getting lost in crowd, and never being good enough. The concerns of abandonment and separation that the trauma of adoption causes can be lifelong, unconscious, impact actions, and even relationships with others. I have come to recognize these feelings as a normal early childhood trauma and can name the worries, recognize them as irrational, and know they will likely continue to impact me in ways I need to honor. Parents should know that even in the most loving homes, these anxieties can occur and are a normal part of an adoptee's experience with the world. These feelings should not be minimized in a way that makes the child feel silly and

know that it is not necessarily a reflection of their current home environment. Many other adoptees I know also have fears around security, abandonment, and loss.

Next, there will be times and situations that frequently occur in an adoptee's life that parents should be aware of as possible triggers for strong emotions and reactions – maybe even on an unconscious level. For me and many of my peers, unknowns around my birth are triggered each year on my birthday. Like everyone else, I enjoy celebrating my birthday, but there is also an inherent sadness not knowing my actual birthday and circumstances surrounding my birth story. At times, this topic can be difficult in a classroom environment. I am often grateful that my birthday occurs in the summer when school is not in session. Each year for my birthday, my family takes me to the beach which allows me to time to think about my birth story and talk about my birth family. Giving space for the birthparent is also an important component in identity formation for an adoptee. While I have no information about my birth family, I am curious and have yet to decide if I would like to begin a search process. I encourage all potential adopters to allow for this possibility, realizing that it has nothing to do with the love a child has for a parent - instead it is more about finding missing puzzle pieces to complete a story. Along this theme, medical history forms and learning about DNA and family trees in school can become an additional trigger for adoptees – especially for those who know little or have no family medical history to report. Many teachers and doctors are insensitive to this reality and can repeatedly question why no family medical history is shared. Parents must teach their children how to address these concerns in a confident way that is normalized. I have learned that many people do not know their family medical history regardless of adoption status.

Overall, adoption is a good way to create a family. However, this legal process is a non-traditional way to make a family and anyone considering it should know that their family formation and choices might be confusing to others, even within simple, everyday interactions. Furthermore, through adoption, one becomes an advocate for your family by educating others. Historically, adoption has had a negative connotation within society as portrayed in many media platforms such as in movies, literature, and in social media. For example, the beloved culturally iconic American movie *Annie* portrays a young girl abandoned by her birth parents and sent to live in an orphanage. Overall, it portrays a negative view of the foster care system and demonstrates the potential for trafficking of vulnerable children. Many of the Disney movies also exploit children's fear of parental loss thus, making adoption a reoccurring topic within school classrooms among students and teachers alike. Additionally, there are current social media videos of people pranking others by telling them they were adopted and laughing at the consequences. Continuous negative media can make it hard on adoptees to feel confident about their identity because the negative perspective portrayed by others about adoption in society can be overwhelming. In considering adoption, one should be ready to combat the negative perspective of adoption held by society throughout history and in current times.

Dear prospective parent, please know that adoption can be hard; it begins with a trauma of loss that must be addressed over a lifetime; however, it can also be a positive experience at the same time. In a world that likes to live in dualities, adoption can be both complicated and joy filled; it can be confusing and clear. It can be overwhelming and all-encompassing and yet simple in terms of love for one another. Please know

that your family unit will be questioned – even by those closest to you. If one is a transracial adoptee, it may be hard for others to understand and see your family as truly yours. There might be kids who tell your child that their parents are not their ‘real’ parents. However, this usually stems from ignorance and a misunderstanding of what a ‘real’ parent is and how adoption forms a forever family. This language and other harsh language will be used and people will look at your family and question it. It is also challenging if you have other adoptive children or a biological child. At the same time, you, the parent, might be completely different looking from your kids and be questioned if they are ‘your’ kids. Unconscious biases against adoption exist and pretending that they do not is a ‘wish’ that will only hurt your family in the end. It is my hope that if you chose adoption as a way to make your family, you will be strong enough to confront these biases for the love of your child and the bond you share. Your child needs you to do this to further help him/her/them feel safe and secure as your children. I have grown up in a family formed by adoption that I love and loves me back without question. I am grateful for my journey and look forward to the future ahead. I wish you much love and joy as you build your family.

Sincerely,

Evalyn Navarro

Houston, Texas