



A Guide to  
Talking About  
Adoption



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## Adoption is Positive

This guide will show you how to talk about adoption positively and respectfully, with the many different people in your life.



## Introduction

Adoption is an incredible act of love. On one end, adoption creates and completes forever families. It makes mothers and fathers out of caring people who may not have been able to become parents otherwise – families who have struggled with infertility, single parents, LGBT couples. Adoption is also beautiful in that it connects people who may have never known one another and creates incredible, unexpected relationships. If you are an adoptive or birth parent, you may understand this firsthand.

At the same time, adoption also gives women facing an unplanned pregnancy the ability to make loving, thoughtful plans for their babies' lives. By choosing adoption, a birth mother can give her child a loving family, a safe and stable home, and a future full of opportunity – all things she may not have been able to provide at the time of her pregnancy. Adoption is a sacrifice made with great love and consideration. It is one of the most difficult, but also one of the most selfless, decisions that a mother can make for her child.

If you have been touched by adoption in some way – whether you are an adoptive parent, a birth parent, or an adopted person – you personally understand how positive adoption can be. You may also acknowledge how sensitive and emotional a subject it can be to discuss. Adoption is a loving and positive choice, but it is not always an easy topic to understand or to speak about with other people. So how do you do it?

How do you talk about adoption with people who do not necessarily understand it? How do you portray adoption in a positive light, so that others can do the same? For adoptive parents, how do you talk about adoption with your child so that they embrace it, and become proud of their adoption story?

Adoptions With Love is a non-profit, private adoption agency. For over 30 years, we have helped birth mothers make loving plans for their babies and families form and grow through adoption. We have taught adoptive parents how to share their child's adoption story and create positive adoption conversations in their homes. We have helped birth parents, adopted children, and families answer difficult questions about adoption. We can also help you. In this guide, we will show you how to talk about adoption positively and respectfully, with the many different people in your life.



# Positive Adoption Language

In the United States today, there are almost two million children who were adopted. Even more of us have been touched by the act of adoption in some way, knowing someone who has been adopted, who has adopted, or being that very person ourselves. Adoption stories exist all around us. That is why it is so important to always use positive adoption language.

As close as some of us may be to adoption, we do not always speak about it the way we intend. It is common to hear the phrase “give up for adoption” or talk about someone’s “real parents” or “adopted child.” The problem is that this type of language carries negative implications. A child hearing the above words may feel unwanted or alone as a result – as though they were given away or do not belong.

Adoption does not mean “giving up.” Children who are adopted are not outliers; they belong in their families and are equally as loved as their brothers and sisters. Adoptive parents are “real” parents; biology does not define family. Birth parents who choose adoption make a plan for their baby’s future; they give their child life, love, and stability.

The way we talk about adoption can affect how others perceive adoption. It can also impact how adopted children, adoptive families, and birth parents see themselves. By talking about adoption positively inside and outside our homes, we can help others see how positive adoption truly is.

Negative Adoption Language	Positive Adoption Language
Real Parent	Birth Parent or Biological Parent
Give Up for Adoption	Make an Adoption Plan
Put Up for Adoption	Choose Adoption
Keep Your Baby	Parent Your Child
Unwanted Pregnancy	Unplanned Pregnancy
Adopted Child	My Child / Their Child
Is Adopted	Was Adopted
Adoptive Parent	Parent, Mother or Father
Adoptable Child	Waiting Child
Relinquished	Made an Adoption Plan



## A Birth Mother on "Giving Up"

Years ago, Adoptions With Love met an incredibly strong woman who decided to make an adoption plan for her baby. She knew that she could not provide the life her daughter deserved, and lovingly selected a family – who was ready and able -- to raise her baby girl. To this day, she hears people say things like, "I could never give my baby away." This is her response.

"I didn't give my baby to strangers. I spent hours reading stories of parents who would love my daughter, found a family that felt right, and personally placed my daughter into her mother's arms. You don't give a baby away. She isn't a gift or an object. She is the most important person in my world.

"Give up" sounds to me like a bad habit, like my beautiful daughter was a mistake I needed to get rid of and adoption was the easy way out. It offends me to think that my daughter is anything but the smart, curious, amazing, funny girl she is. She's the best thing that ever happened to me, and I'm so proud of who she is. Saying I gave her up implies that her existence was a problem that I needed adoption to fix. Nothing could be further from the truth.

"Put up for adoption" is another phrase I hate, because it sounds impersonal and transactional. Like I posted an ad on Craigslist for newborn baby – free to a good home. As I mentioned, babies are not gifts or commodities. They are the most precious parts of ourselves and as birth mothers, we love our children more than I can possibly express.

I much prefer saying that I chose adoption, or that I placed my daughter with a family. I think that captures the feeling much better – that I chose her parents, that I was involved the whole way through, that it was a decision I made out of love, that I took my time to make the choice. Most of all, that I took the time to choose the right people – I didn't just accept whoever came along first."



### Adoption is Not Giving Up

When a woman chooses adoption, she is making a thoughtful plan for the rest of her baby's life, including choosing loving parents.



## Talking About Adoption With Others

In the past, adoption was hardly ever talked about – many children did not know they were adopted; birth parents and adoptive parents typically did not know about one another; no one kept in touch after the adoption took place. Adoption files were almost always kept secret and closed. Often, this is how television and the media portray adoption – the way it used to be.

Adoption has changed greatly over the years. Today, the majority of private, domestic adoptions are open. This means adoptive families and birth parents have an ongoing relationship with one another. Most children today know they were adopted, and many even know their birth parents personally.

As a hopeful parent, adoptive parent, or birth parent, you may understand all the positive choices that go into an adoption and the incredible outcomes that can stem from it. For people on the outside looking in, however, the concept of adoption is not always an easy one to grasp.

Older relatives of yours, for example, may say things like, “All adopted children have problems.” Adoptive parents especially might hear comments such as, “Your adopted child looks just like you” and “I cannot believe you stay in touch with his real mother!” These remarks may come off insensitive, but typically, are not intended to be. Many people simply do not know how to talk about adoption.

Being a part of the adoption triad, you have a unique opportunity to teach people about adoption and to shape positive attitudes around it. This can benefit other people as well as your family. The way other people talk about adoption can influence your child’s perspective, so it is important to always encourage positive vocabulary and conversations around you. As a parent, you are your child’s biggest advocate.

When you hear misperceptions or misguided language about adoption, politely correct them. If you sense awkwardness or discomfort around the subject, encourage others to ask you questions about it. Set the tone for positive adoption conversations. People – whether relatives, friends, or neighbors – will take cues from you. This will also change the way they explain adoption and modern family make-ups to their children.



### Changing Perspectives

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## Answering Questions About Adoption: A Guide for Adoptive Parents

Adopting a child was one of the best events to ever happen to your family. On one hand, you want to share your adoption story with the world. Then again, you know it is also your child's story to tell. So how do you answer others' questions about adoption, without giving away too much? How do you respond to questions that may be hurtful to your child? Adoptions With Love provides some sample responses below.

**Who/Where are your child's real parents? Was his mom a teenager?**

We are [Name's] real parents. If you are asking about his biological parents, we are keeping that information private right now, until [Name] is ready to share it. We can tell you that most birth mothers are actually in their twenties.

**How could anyone give up such a beautiful child?**

His birth mother did not give him up. She was not in the right time or place to raise any child, so she chose to make an adoption plan. She loves our son very much.

**Why would you keep in touch with your child's birth mother? Isn't it confusing?**

Actually, research shows open adoption is very positive for children. By having this relationship with his birth mother, [Name] can grow up knowing what his biological parents are like, where he came from, and fully embrace his identity. Open adoption also shows him just how loved he is by so many different people.

**What if his/her birth parents change their minds?**

Our adoption was finalized in court. Legally, we are his parents.

**It's too bad you could not have a child of your own.**

[Name] is our own child.

**Are all adopted children troubled?**

Studies show that children who were adopted are as well-adjusted, successful, and healthy as their non-adopted peers.

**How much did it cost for your child?**

With adoption, you do not pay for a child—typically, you pay for legal, social work, and medical fees. If you are interested in these fees you can call the adoption agency or attorney. Grants, credits, and reimbursements can help with the costs.

The most important thing to remember as an adoptive parent is that you are your child's biggest support. When answering others' questions about adoption, always reinforce your child's sense of belonging in your family. How you answer these questions now will help your child respond to similar questions from his or her peers.



## Answering Questions About Adoption: A Guide for Birth Parents

Making an adoption plan is a deeply personal choice. As a birth parent, you chose adoption with deep thought and love. You knew it was the best option for your baby at that time. Adoption is a huge part of your life, and though others may not always see it, your child is, too. More than likely, you think about your child all the time – and sometimes, want to talk (and brag) about him or her.

When people ask questions about your adoption experience, it can be a great opportunity to share your story, or the photos and scribble drawings you received in the mail. Sometimes, however, people's questions can feel hurtful if they are phrased wrong. Try not to take these personally; use them as an opportunity to educate others about adoption and the choices you thoughtfully made.

### Why didn't you keep your baby?

I chose adoption for my child because I wanted her to have a healthy, loving family and a safe, stable home. I thought she deserved the best, and I was unprepared to give that to her.

### I don't know what I would do with an unwanted pregnancy.

My pregnancy was not unwanted, it was unplanned.

### Don't you love your child?

Yes, I love her so much that I chose to make a plan for her life. I love her so much that I chose the perfect parents to raise her.

### How could you give your baby away to strangers?

I did not give my baby away; I looked through many families before choosing the right one. I chose parents who were financially and emotionally prepared to raise (and love) a baby for life. I also had the opportunity to talk and meet with them, and I know they will be great parents.

### Don't you want to see your child again?

Of course, and with open adoption, that is an option for me when I am ready. Most adoptions today involve some level of contact between the birth and adoptive families. I can also see my child through photos sent to me by her parents.

### How will you ever explain your decision to your child?

I plan to stay a part of my daughter's life. If she ever asks about, I will be there to give her open and honest answers. She knows she is adopted and that it was a decision made with love.





## Explaining Adoption to Your Child

Today, most children who were adopted know their story by the age of five. Nine out of 10 children have very positive feelings about their adoption. Children love to hear about themselves, and more than likely, your child will love to hear how he or she became a part of your family. Still, approaching the conversation can be intimidating for parents. How do you start the conversation?

Discussing adoption with your child now can help lay the groundwork for a positive, lifelong conversation. It can also help your child understand and embrace adoption. As you start explaining adoption to your child – or any child – there are two things you must get across:

1. **All families (especially the child's own) are permanent.** Your child will always be loved and safe with you.
2. **There are many ways to create a family.** Children can be raised by their birth parents or their adoptive parents. Each family, no matter their make-up, is just as real as the other.

To help you navigate the adoption conversation with your little one, Adoptions With Love provides some tips below.

### *Start talking about adoption when your child is young.*

The general rule of thumb for adoptive parents is, "Tell them early and tell them often." You can begin talking about adoption with your little one the minute you welcome him or her home. We recommend starting the adoption conversations in infancy – telling his or her story during diaper changes, walks in the stroller, and bedtime snuggles at night. By introducing the language early on – even if he or she does not understand it just yet – you will all become accustomed to it.

### *Be honest and open.*

Your child's adoption story is exactly that – his or her own. Your son or daughter deserves to know the facts about his or her adoption, birth family, and background. If you do not know an answer to your child's question, it is okay to say so. Do not make things up. Remember that while being honest is important, it is also important to keep conversations age-appropriate.

*more →*



### *Keep Conversations Going*

Adoption is a lifelong conversation. Always be willing to talk about adoption with your child, and encourage conversations at home.



## *Explaining Adoption to Your Child (cont)*

### *Keep your conversations developmentally appropriate.*

Around the ages of three and four, children start asking questions like, “Did I grow in your tummy?” You need to answer questions like this truthfully, but with language that a young child can grasp. Know what your child can handle now, and which details can be saved for a later date. Keep in mind that children often see things as black or white, and grey areas are harder to understand. When explaining adoption to your child, say simple things like:

- “Every baby is born to a woman and a man. You were born from your birth mother’s tummy.”
- “Families can be very different. Some children live with the family they were born in, and some live with the family that adopts them.”
- “Sometimes, a mommy and daddy can’t take care of the baby that was born to them, so they find another family to raise their child. This is called adoption.”

### *Keep the conversation going. Be willing to talk about it.*

Talking about adoption is not a one-time thing. It is an ongoing conversation that will evolve as your child grows. Research shows children only begin to understand adoption after age six, so it is important to have the groundwork of your child’s adoption story laid out beforehand. Start in infancy and encourage the conversation to continue through adolescence. Talk about adoption whenever it seems to play a role in what is going on around you, such as when your child notices a pregnant woman.

### *Help your child feel comfortable in asking questions and sharing his or her feelings.*

Children do not always voice how they feel. In fact, many children who were adopted will not vocalize their feelings or questions in fear of offending their adoptive parents. It is important to keep an open conversation in your home, and to encourage your child to ask questions. Reinforce that talking about his/her birthparents does not hurt your feelings. Talking about adoption is healthy for your child. Always be willing to talk to your child about his or her feelings, birth parents, or adoption and your family.

### *Find child-friendly resources to help explain adoption.*

There are many resources you can use to help introduce your child’s adoption story. Picture books about adoption, for example, can illustrate other families by adoption and normalize this concept for your child. You may also create an Adoption Lifebook, which is a “baby book” or scrapbook detailing your child’s own story.



## Teaching Your Child to Talk About Adoption

Children are naturally curious. Unless a family has been touched by adoption, many children will grow up believing that being born to a mom and dad is the only way to make a family. If your child was adopted, he or she will likely encounter a lot of questions from curious peers at school – What does adoption mean? Are those your real parents? Where did you come from?

Teaching your child to answer these questions using positive adoption language is important as he or she reaches school-age. The best way to do so is by setting an example. When people ask you questions about your adoption experience, craft your responses so that your child can learn from them. Then, after the conversation passes, talk to your child about why you responded the way you did.

For example, if someone asks you, “Where is your child from?” You may say, “[Name] is from Massachusetts, just like you and me. He was born in [State] with his birth mom, who chose us to be his parents.” Here are some other sample responses you can teach your child to say:

“Why do you look different from your parents?”

“My parents adopted me. I was born to another couple who looks like me.”

“Why are you asking?”

“What happened to your real mom and dad?”

“My parents are real. If you are talking about my birth parents, they weren’t ready to be parents, so they picked my mom and dad to raise me.”

“Will you ever meet your real mother?”

“Do you mean the woman that gave birth to me? I have met her. My family sends her letters and pictures and we sometimes talk on the phone.”

“That’s something we talk about at home.”

“Why didn’t your parents keep you?”

“My birth parents didn’t raise me because they couldn’t at the time, because of grown-up reasons. They chose my parents, who will always take care of me.”

“I don’t feel like answering that question.”

Remember, your child should never feel pressured to talk about his or her adoption story with peers. If a classmate asks, “Where did you come from?” It is okay for your child to say, “outer space!” This is your child’s adoption story.



## Conclusion

The way we talk about adoption can influence the way others perceive it. By recognizing that adoption is a choice made with love, we show respect for all the birth parents who made this brave sacrifice. By recognizing that adoptive parents are real, valid parents, we honor them and all they do for their children. Finally, by talking about adoption as another way to form a family, we show children that they belong and are loved, no matter their family make-up.

Your attitude towards adoption, and the words you choose each day, are the best models for children. Whether you are an adoptive parent or birth parent, are considering adoption or are simply curious about it, know that what you say matters. Talking about adoption with pride and respect can help children embrace adoption, understand it, and frame their language around it.

If you are an adoptive parent or birth parent, know that your say matters most. You can help dispel myths about adoption by being an advocate for the personal choices you have made. Show others that it is okay to talk about adoption and show them how to talk about it positively – whether that is educating your relatives or speaking to your child's first grade classroom.

If you do not have a personal connection to adoption, but know someone who does, recognize that it is always okay to ask questions – just be mindful of the way in which you frame these questions. Be empathetic. Be understanding. Respect family make-ups, personal boundaries, and others' feelings. Adoption is a sensitive subject, but it is also a beautiful and loving act. As one birth mother told Adoptions With Love:

**I think of adoption as such an amazing and loving and beautiful thing, and I wish people knew that it is emotional, but it can also be wonderful.**

Adoption is a part of many people's lives all around us. If you would like to learn more about adoption language or how to talk about adoption, you may contact Adoptions With Love toll-free at 1-800-722-7731. You may also stay tuned for our next eBook, on when to talk about adoption with your child.



### *Be an Adoption Advocate*

Talking about adoption with pride and respect can help children embrace their adoption story and frame their language around it.