

Adoption and Life's Milestones

Identity, Connection, and Growth

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Voices in this session are real adult adoptees who shared their stories for research. Quotes are used with consent.

How This Session Works

90 minutes together

Two presenters, two lifespan paths, one conversation. We will move through content, hear from real voices, and interact together through prompts. We will listen, learn and lead together.

This is not a lecture

It is an opportunity for self-reflection, and growth. You will be asked to respond in chat, reflect, and engage.

Real voices throughout

Quotes come from adult adoptees in a qualitative research study.

No 101 review here

You already know adoption involves loss and trauma. We are going deeper.

Two paths. One conversation.

Renée Murphy

Practitioner-Researcher | MA Candidate

Child welfare engaged at 2

Two foster homes

Adopted at 5

Estranged from adoptive family at 17

US Air Force

Software and tech executive

Returning student, clinical mental health counseling

Researcher

Mother of two

Grandmother

Angela Christianson

Adult Adoptee | Advocate | MA Candidate

Domestic infant adoptee relinquished at birth

3 placements in first 30 days of life

Adopted at 18 months

Older brother also adopted, non-genetic sibling

In reunion with maternal family since 2019

Children's librarian - 27 years

Passionate animal rescuer with special needs pets

Returned to school at 49, clinical mental health
counseling

Researcher

PART ONE

Why Adoption Keeps Coming Back

Adoption has a structure that makes certain moments harder

Four things are true for every adoptee, regardless of how positive or painful the adoption story is:

- 1 Adoptees were separated from their first family before they could understand it.
- 2 There are questions about where they came from — who they look like, their medical history — that may never be fully answered.
- 3 They grow up not seeing themselves reflected in the people around them.
- 4 The world told them to be grateful.

Let's Start Together

Tell us who's in the room. Adoptee, adoptive parent,
foster parent, professional, family member —
whatever fits.

And what do you hope to take from today?

Type your response in the chat

Most adoptees find a settled arrangement. Then something disrupts it.

Adoption moves into the background. Most adoptees build a liveable relationship with it — and then a specific event breaks that equilibrium.

A birthday or family event

The question of where you came from

Becoming a parent

The mirror you never had

A DNA test or health crisis

The urgency of knowing that rewrites itself overnight

The work doesn't start at disruption. It surfaces when equilibrium breaks — what participants called coming out of the fog.

Adoption is not something that happened to you.

It is part of who you are.

If adoption is an event

the goal is integration and closure.

If adoption is identity

the goal is a self rooted enough to bear the full weight of the story, and flexible enough to let it keep changing.

The Lifespan Relational Meaning-Making Framework (LRMF)

A theoretical framework for understanding adult adoptee experience

Engaged layer

Active when settlement is disrupted

Three interdependent dimensions · Foundational core of loss

Activation events · Response pathways

What are adoptees working through when the settled arrangement is disrupted?



Middle layer

The settled arrangement

A provisional equilibrium in which adoption is present but not acute

Real

Adoption conditions shape experience
without demanding constant attention

Provisional

Settlement can be disrupted
Activation events make visible

Why is adoption not always foregrounded in daily experience?



Primary layer

Adoption as developmental context

The conditions within which identity forms from the beginning

Placement age

Timing of adoption

Communicative
openness

Information access

Attachment
security

Relational foundation

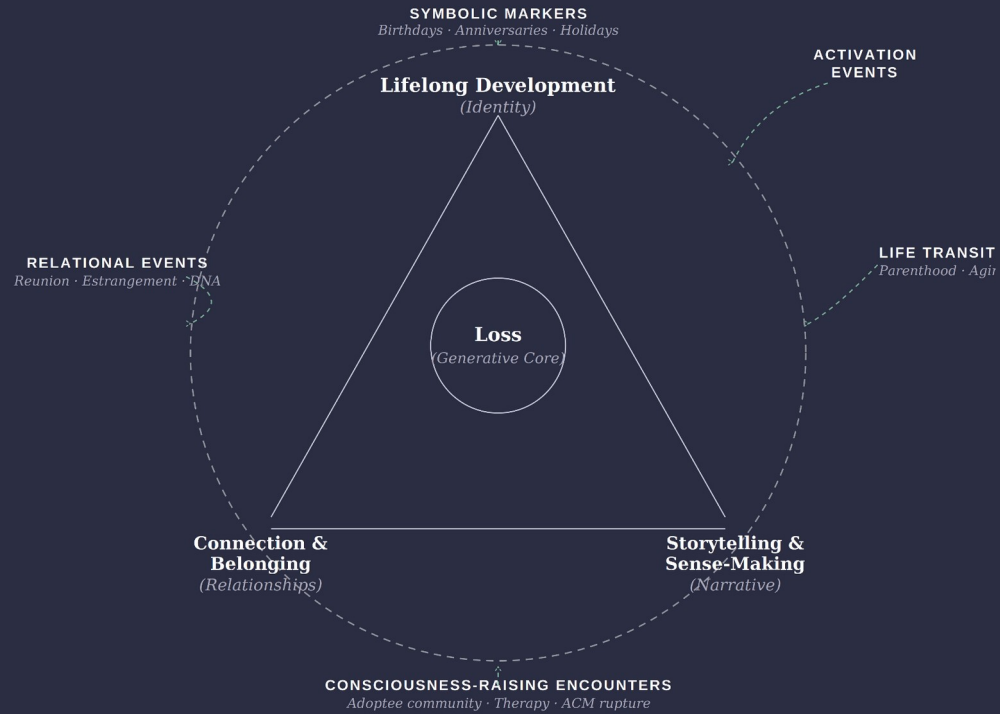
Genealogical
discontinuity

Biological gaps

Why are adoptees who they are? Where did the foundational questions come from?

The Lifespan Relational Meaning-Making Framework (LRMF)

A Theoretical Framework for Understanding Adult Adoptee Experience



RESPONSE PATHWAYS
Mediated by relational safety, communicative openness, access to information, and support


Cyclical Integration
Deepening coherence over time


Arrested Processing
Stuck in one dimension


Avoidance / Suppression
Loss deflected; cycle does not engage


Narrative Collapse
Narrative disconnection; relationships rupture

What shapes a tree?

The climate

Shapes the tree before the tree has any awareness of it. You don't feel climate moment to moment. It is simply the conditions within which you developed.

The tree

The self. Growing within those conditions. Not damaged. Exactly what it became in the conditions it was given.

The weather

The activation events. A storm doesn't create weakness in the wood. It finds what was structurally present all along.

In the LRMF

Climate = Primary Layer

Adoption as developmental context. The structural conditions present from the beginning.

Tree on an ordinary day = Middle Layer

The settled arrangement. Adoption is present but not acute. Most daily life looks like this.

Weather = Engaged Layer

The activation events. What was structurally present becomes impossible to set aside.

Loss is not necessarily trauma. But it is loss.

What this distinction protects

Not every adoptee is traumatized. Framing all adoptee experience as trauma erases variation — and alienates those who don't recognize themselves in that language.

Naming it as loss, rather than trauma, is more precise and more inclusive.

What this distinction demands

Loss still requires acknowledgment. You can have a loving adoptive family and a warm adoption story and still grieve the first family, the identity questions, the medical history you don't have.

The absence of trauma does not mean the absence of loss. Both deserve a witness.

"My brother doesn't care one whit about identifying as an adopted person, has no desire to search. And I don't see it as denial — I just think that's his personality." — Interviewee 34, on his brother's relationship to adoption identity

Three domains where the adoption structure makes itself felt.

IDENTITY & MEANING-MAKING

Who am I, and where do I come from?

Adoptees engage in meaning-making work — constructing a coherent self-story — that most people never have to consciously do. Questions about origins, physical resemblance, and genetic history stay open. The work isn't a sign of disturbance. It is a reasonable response to a real structural condition.

CONNECTION & BELONGING

Do I fit here? Am I claimed? Is this really mine?

Belonging is not just about feeling loved — it is about feeling legible. Adoptees often navigate multiple family systems with competing claims. For foster kids, belonging is tested repeatedly. The core question — "will they keep me" — can become a baseline assumption rather than a conscious fear.

STORYTELLING & NARRATIVE

What is the story of my life, and how do I tell it?

Narrative identity is the coherent story we construct about who we are and how we got here. Adoptees are often asked to tell their story in social situations. The story has gaps, complexity, and sometimes competing versions. Milestones are when the demand comes fastest.

For foster kids, the structure is the same. The terrain is more complex.

What's different

- The four conditions are present, layered on top of ongoing relational instability.
- Bio family may still be in the picture. Visits, calls, disruptions while the child is trying to belong somewhere else simultaneously.
- Multiple placements mean the self-story has been interrupted more than once. Every move is a narrative rupture, not just a logistical change.
- Belonging is the core unmet need for youth who age out. Not housing. Belonging.

What this means

When birth family is still present, the child is not grieving a clean absence. They are navigating loyalty, love, anger, and hope all at once, often with people who hurt them and whom they still love.

Activation events fire differently in this context. A birth parent's illness. A foster sibling surfacing after twenty years. Watching your own child reach the age you were when love and removal arrived together. The body has kept the whole equation. Not just the loss, but the love that made the loss complicated.

PART TWO

The Milestone Moments

Real voices. Real moments.

Why milestones? When gaps become visible

IDENTITY

Identity is the answer to “who am I and where do I come from.”

For most people, milestone rituals assume that answer is available. You know the story of the day you were born. You have a medical history. You look like someone.

For adoptees, milestones surface the gaps where that continuity was supposed to be.

BELONGING

Belonging is the answer to "do I fit here?, am I claimed?, is this really mine?."

Milestones are often when belonging is most public and when family structure is most visible to everyone.

For foster and adoptees whose bio family is still present, milestones can put competing loyalties on a collision course. Who gives the toast? Who is the real grandmother?

Belonging is the wound we carry into every room.

Thirteen of fifteen participants. Three ways of saying the same thing.

“Belonging is the thorn in my side that I will carry with me.”

— Interviewee 30 | Adult adoptee, age 52

“That deep sense of not belonging always follows me.”

— Interviewee 34 | Adult adoptee, age early 60s

“Might they put me back on the shelf?”

— Interviewee 44 | Adult adoptee, age 61 | On belonging in close relationships

Three people. Three different words. The same undercurrent.

Belonging difficulty was not situational. It was a continuous undercurrent across all relational domains — present in 13 of 15 participants. It is not a symptom. It is the adoption structure doing what the adoption structure does.

A birthday is not just a birthday.

When you don't know the story of the day you were born, the anniversary of that day lands differently.

“It’s being relinquished all over again every year.”

— Interviewee 07 | Adult adoptee

What a parent can do: Notice the date. Don’t assume it’s just a birthday. Finalization dates carry weight too — three in fifteen participants described “gotcha days” as offensive: positive framing imposed on what was also a loss.

When Adoptees Become Parents

Becoming a parent can bring adoption grief back with unexpected intensity

When Adoptees become parents

- Identity questions about origins and genealogy
- Medical history gaps ("What do I put on this form?")
- Grief about not knowing what they looked like as babies
- Postpartum and depression as an unexpected trigger

After I stopped recording, she remembered that she suffered from serious postpartum depression after both of her children. She called it the 4th trimester — and said it really brought her adoption into focus.

— Interviewee 25 | Researcher's note

"I think that's always a triggering point for adopted people, when they are adding a biological person to their family."

— Interviewee 34

Note: not becoming a parent is also a milestone. The intergenerational story ends differently.

*"I love whenever somebody says:
Oh my god, he looks just like you."*

"I would just wait for them to say it. Yeah, yeah, he does, doesn't he?"

— Interviewee 44 | On finding a biological sibling at age 40

Not seeing yourself reflected in anyone around you is one of the four structural conditions of adoption. For many adoptees, it is invisible until the moment it is resolved — and then the weight of carrying it becomes clear.

Many adoptees spend years in the grateful narrative — and then have to unpack it.

I did exist for a while in the 'I'm so grateful I was adopted' narrative, which is very common, very typical — and then had to unpack that and realize that, yeah, adoption can bring healing, but it does not take away or erase or diminish loss of first family, loss of that connection and identity.

— Interviewee 30 | Adult adoptee, age 52

The gratitude narrative is not dishonest. It is often both true and incomplete. Midlife is frequently when adoptees begin to make room for what the gratitude was covering.

Society has a problem with adoptee grief.

If I said I lost my mom...

"Oh my god, I'm so sorry to hear that."

If I said I lost my mom through adoption...

"Oh, but you were adopted!"

That problem solved.

— Interviewee 44

Adoptees learn early that their grief does not register as grief. That silence teaches them something — and many carry it for decades.

Name it. Don't fix it.

Adoptee grief is real, ongoing, and structural. Three frames help name it — not as pathology, but as permission.

Ambiguous loss

Grieving something they never fully had and cannot name. The birth family they didn't know. The medical history that isn't there. The face they never saw reflected back. There is no ceremony for this loss. That's part of what makes it hard to hold.

Disenfranchised grief

Loss that others don't validate or even see. Adoptees learn early that their grief doesn't register as grief. That silence teaches something — and many carry it for decades. Naming it as real grief, in front of other people, is itself therapeutic.

Developmental grief

Not a wound reopening — a self deepening. When adoption surfaces at 35 or 52, it isn't regression. It's development doing what development does. The self finally has enough stability to ask the harder questions.

The goal is not that the hard feelings disappear. It is that there is enough room to bring them.

PART THREE

The Fear in the Room

What adoptive and foster parents carry — and what it costs.

Most adoptive parents carry at least one of these.

The Replacement Fear

If they find their birth family, will they still need me?

The Loyalty Fear

Their curiosity about origins means I wasn't enough.

The Unknown Fear

What if the birth family is chaotic, harmful, or wants back in?

None of these fears are unreasonable. All of them are worth naming out loud.

When parents can't hold the fear, adoptees learn to suppress the curiosity.

Not because they stopped wondering. Because they are protecting the relationship.

A child who senses that asking about their birth family upsets their parent will stop asking.

That suppression can last decades — and often surfaces hard at a milestone.

The adoptees who struggle most at reunion are usually those who never felt safe asking questions at home.

The goal is to acknowledge the fear and still not let it determine what your child is allowed to wonder.

Adoption can bring healing, but it does not take away or erase or diminish loss of first family, loss of that connection and identity.

The healing is real. The loss is real. Both exist. They do not cancel each other out.

— Interviewee 30 | Adult adoptee, age 52

You really can balance two families. We don't question when parents have a second child whether that parent can love the second child as much as the first.

So let's not question whether an adoptive child can love their biological family and their adoptive family.

Love can extend in whatever its form to multiple places.

Make space for all of that.

Reunion has a recognizable arc, and it does not end the same way for everyone.

The approach

Hope, fantasy, the imagined version of who they'll be. The adoptee often builds a story before the first contact.

The meeting

Warm, overwhelming, sometimes overwhelming in the wrong direction. Often more complicated than the fantasy.

The reality

The birth parent is also a person — with their own pain, limitations, other children, reasons they couldn't stay. The adoptee may find the relationship they hoped for isn't possible.

What comes next?

Reunions take different shapes from here. Some settle into an ongoing connection.

Some fade or end, and many adoptees describe that as a second loss.

Some live on and off across decades. The shape that emerges depends on the actual people involved.

What an adoptive parent can do: name it before it happens. "If you search and it doesn't go the way you hope, I will still be here."

A lot can live inside an adoptee that has nowhere safe to go.

What many adoptees carry

- Anger — at the circumstances, at those who couldn't stay, sometimes at those who did
- Shame — the felt sense that something about them caused the separation
- Hurt — layered and sometimes wordless, reaching back before language
- Rejection as a learned expectation — the body learns that love ends, and anticipates it

What safe relationships do

- They create conditions for expression rather than suppression — feelings can come out without destroying something important
- They interrupt the learned expectation of rejection — the relationship stays, even after the hard moment
- They allow the story to be told and witnessed — which is different from being solved

The goal is not that the hard feelings disappear. It is that there is a relationship safe enough to bring them into.

This is what adoptee community also provides — and what therapy without adoption competency can fail to provide.

Two things that matter more than most realize.

Adoptee community as healing

Many adoptees describe connecting with other adoptees as the first time they didn't have to explain themselves.

Being understood without translation — of having someone say "yes, me too" about experiences family minimized — is itself therapeutic.

Adoptee-led spaces, podcasts, and communities do work no individual clinician can fully replicate. Encourage your child toward them. Don't compete with them.

Therapy without adoption competency can hurt

A clinician who doesn't understand the structural conditions of adoption may:

- Misattribute grief as depression
- Miss adoption's role in identity struggles
- Pathologize normal adoptee meaning-making
- Reinforce the idea that gratitude should be enough
- Push toward resolution before the loss is witnessed

Adoption-competent therapy treats adoption as the subject, not the backdrop.

Ask any therapist: "What's your experience working with adoptees?" The answer tells you everything.

The Conversations That Don't Happen

Some things live in adoptive families for years without being named.

Not because anyone is hiding them. Because nobody opened the door.

The test in the drawer.

Most adoptees have wanted to take a DNA test. Many already have.

Many adoptees haven't told their parents.

Many adoptive parents haven't brought it up. Not because it was secret. Because neither could tell if it was okay to want what it might find.

The test is not a threat to the relationship. It is a question that has been waiting in the house. Sitting in the drawer waiting for permission.

In the chat: Has the DNA test come up in your house? In any form. Talked about, taken, considered, or sitting in the silence between you. Adoptees: has it been on your mind? Adoptive parents: has it come up in your family? Type your response in the chat.

The conversations that don't happen

Grateful and what else

Adoptees feel grateful and grieving at the same time

Adoptive families feel grateful and frustrated or sad or both

Only gratitude gets social permission. The rest goes underground

A child's desire to know where they came from is not a verdict on their adoptive family. It was always going to be there.

In the chat:

Adoptees: if it were safe, what would you want your adoptive family to know?

Adoptive parents: if it were safe, what would you want to say to your child?

Finding. And what it actually is.

Reunion is rarely what either person imagined.

The research describes a recognizable arc: hope, contact, complexity, and often a new kind of loss.

The birth parent who couldn't show up. The relationship that formed and then faded. For some adoptees, finding out a sibling was kept while they were relinquished.

Reunion doesn't resolve the adoption structure. It introduces new people into it. Six in fifteen participants described it as simultaneously transformative and painful.

In the chat: *What had you imagined reunion would look like? What do you imagine now? What did you hope reunion would mean for your child? What did you hope it would mean for you?*

The day that holds two stories.

Some days carry more than one story. Both of them true.

Mother's Day. The birthday. The finalization anniversary. These dates ask adoptees to hold grief and gratitude at the same time.

Nine in fifteen participants named birthdays as reliably bringing adoption into focus. Three described finalization days as difficult rather than celebratory.

Many adoptive families move through these days together without naming what is also present. Not from avoidance. Because nobody knew how to open it.

In the chat: *Is there a day in your year that you and your child move through differently, and neither of you quite says why?*

PART FIVE

What to Take Home

Three things to notice. Three things to say. Three things to stop saying.

NOTICE

- Milestone dates on the calendar
- Withdrawal or mood shifts at holidays
- When your child stops asking questions

SAY

- "I wonder about that too sometimes."
- "You're allowed to feel more than one thing."
- "We can make space for all of it."

STOP SAYING

- "You should just be grateful."
- "We are your real family."
- "You have a great life — why does this matter?"

The goal is not an adoption that never surfaces.

It is an adoptee who has enough room to engage with it honestly when it does —

and a parent steady enough to hold it with them.

Make space for all of that.

— Interviewee 30 | Adult adoptee, age 52

Adoptee Resources

Organizations, communities, and tools for adoptees at any stage of their journey

Community & Connection

Adoptees Connect

Peer-led support groups across the U.S.

Adoptee Mentoring Society

Mentorship & community lounges by age

American Adoption Congress

National network for reform & support

Finding a Therapist

Adoptee Therapist Directory

Therapists who are also adoptees (Grow Beyond Words)

C.A.S.E. TAC Directory

Training for Adoption Competency-certified therapists

Boston Post Adoption Resources

Trauma-informed care & group therapy

Search & DNA

DNAngels

Free DNA search angels for biological family

Int'l Soundex Reunion Registry

Largest free mutual-consent reunion registry

Adoption Network Cleveland

Search assistance & DNA guidance

Voices & Stories

Adoption Unfiltered (Podcast)

Birth mom, adoptee & adoptive parent perspectives

Dear Adoption

Essay collection written by adoptees

Lost Daughters

Collaborative writing by adult women adoptees

Advocacy & Rights

Bastard Nation

Adoptee civil & human rights advocacy

Adoptee Rights Coalition

Access to original birth certificates

NPE Fellowship

Community for Not Parent Expected discoveries

Specific Communities

Pact, An Adoption Alliance

Support for adoptees & families of color

KAAN

Korean American Adoptee Adoptive Family Network

Adoption Mosaic

Adoptee-led panel discussions & programs

This is not an exhaustive list. Many local and identity-specific resources also exist. Always honor where you are in your own journey.

Adoptive Parent Resources

Research-informed tools, communities, and guidance for adoptive and foster families

Books & Research

Brodzinsky & Pinderhughes (2002)

Parenting the Adopted Child — most research-grounded parent resource

The Connected Child — Purvis et al.

Practical, trauma-informed parenting (TBRI)

The Primal Wound — Verrier (1993)

Widely read by adoptees; claims debated but names real experiences

Online & Community Support

Adoptive Families Magazine

Research-informed. Strong on lifespan topics.
adoptivefamilies.com

NACAC

North American Council on Adoptable Children.
nacac.org

Creating a Family

Podcast, articles & online training for adoptive parents

Therapy & Professional Help

C.A.S.E.

Center for Adoption Support & Education. Pre- and post-adoption counseling.

Adoption Competency Training

Ask any therapist: "What's your experience with adoptees?"

Boston Post Adoption Resources

Trauma-informed care for adoptive families.
bpar.org

Foster & Kinship Care

Casey Family Programs

Leading foster care research & practice guides.
casey.org

Child Welfare Info Gateway

Federal clearinghouse for foster & adoption resources. childwelfare.gov

Fostering Connections

Resources for foster families navigating transitions.
fosteringconnections.org

Trauma-Informed Parenting

Empowered to Connect

Free TBRI resources and trainings.
empoweredtoconnect.org

Trust-Based Relational Intervention

Most evidence-based approach for children from hard places

Karyn Purvis Institute

Research, training & resources. child.tcu.edu

Transracial & Identity

Pact, An Adoption Alliance

Resources for transracial adoptive families.
pactadopt.org

KAAN

Korean American Adoptee Adoptive Family Network. kaanconnect.org

In Their Voices

Adoptee-led resources for transracial adoptive parents

This is not an exhaustive list. Adoption-competent support makes a real difference — for your child and for you.