

AFFCNY 37th Annual Conference

Adoption and Life's Milestones

Identity, Connection, and Growth

Speaker Notes

Renée Murphy & Angela Christianson

May 1, 2026

SLIDE 1

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Angela – Welcome! We are very glad you are "here" with us today for this session. Thank you for sharing your time with us. We hope the next 90 minutes are insightful, thought-provoking and you leave this session with new awareness.

SLIDE 2

BEFORE WE BEGIN

Angela Slide

The theme of this conference is LISTENING, LEARNING and LEADING. We hope that you will participate as you are comfortable.

We will talk about hard things, from a place of wanting to help. Please come with open minds, open hearts. You will not be asked to share anything you don't want to share. Renee and I want to create a safe space for reflection, learning and growth

SLIDE 3

BEFORE WE BEGIN

Angela: so what makes us qualified to talk about adoption? We are both adoptees but that is only part of our identity.

Renee Section

I am Renée Murphy. I am an adult adoptee. Claiming that identity is newer than you might think, even though I have known I was adopted my whole life. I was placed at five, after time with my biological family and two foster homes. Like a lot of you in this room, I have lived inside this question my whole life. There is a second piece of context that matters for what we are doing today. I am a practitioner-researcher in clinical mental health counseling. The work I am bringing into this session is built on an IRB-approved qualitative study with fifteen adult adoptees, and a framework I developed called the Lifespan Relational Meaning-Making Framework, which we will get to. What you hear today is their voices, alongside ours.

ANGELA: I have always known I was adopted. If I had to pick only one thing I could tell someone about me, I would tell them that I am adopted. I have been in reunion with my maternal family since 2019 after finding them through DNA at the age of 44. I am changing careers after 27 years of being a children's librarian and am currently pursuing a 2nd Masters in Clinical mental health counseling. I am a firm believer in post-adoption support for all parties touched by adoption. My hope is when I graduate, I will help counsel adoptees, first parents, adoptive & foster parents.

Renee and I are just two adoptees out of approximately 2-4 million in the United States today. We do not speak for every adoptee. But we are two adoptees who have lived adoption for over five decades. For us, sometimes adoption is in the background and sometimes it has been center stage.

SLIDE 4

PART ONE

Angela

So now let's talk about why adoption keeps coming back.

SLIDE 5

WHY ADOPTION KEEPS COMING BACK

Angela -

#1 - even if children are placed as toddlers, school age or adolescents, their brains are not developed fully to understand the relational impact of adoption. Science is now showing that our brains don't fully develop until late 20s, some science says even early 30s.

#2 - It is natural for adoptees to be curious about their origins. We will talk more about this later.

#3 - Many adoptees long to see themselves reflected in people around them and often wonder who they look like, where they get certain characteristics, etc. This is called genetic mirroring.

#4 - Many adoptees are told to be grateful for being adopted. We will talk more about this narrative later in the presentation.

SLIDE 6

Let's Start Together

ANGELA:

Before we go further into the framework, I want to do one quick thing. Let's actually meet each other a little.

In the chat, tell us two things if you are willing.

First, your connection to adoption. Adoptee, adoptive parent, foster parent, professional, family member, whatever fits.

Second, what did you come hoping to take from today? Could be one word. Understanding. Language. A new way to think about something. Whatever brought you here.

This is just orientation. We want to know who is in the room before we go deeper.

One thing about language while you're typing. The research we conducted was with adult adoptees, and two of them came up through foster care before they were adopted. So when we say "adoptee" in the slides ahead, we are being technically accurate to the study. But I want to name that the structural conditions we are about to walk through apply just as strongly, often more so, to people who came up through foster care, NPE, kinship placements, or any version of being raised outside biology. If that is your experience, please hear yourself in this. The framework is yours too.

SLIDE 7

WHY ADOPTION KEEPS COMING BACK

Angela

Let's talk about why adoption challenges don't "go away" once a child is placed and an adoption is finalized. Some may assume that when the gavel hits the courtroom desk, the paperwork is finalized and the adoption is completed that the adoption is "done." The adoption may settle into the background, not taking up center stage. For adoptees, there

can be activating events that happen that bring adoption back into sharp focus. Some of these may be days on the calendar such as birthdays, Mother's day, or placement days. Other times adoption can come back into focus with life events as we move through our lives, such as becoming a parent or when there is a health crisis or medical emergency. Other times something that does not seem obvious may bring adoption back into focus such as a sudden health crisis or a DNA test. These are just a few examples of events that may bring adoption back to center stage.

SLIDE 8

Adoption is not something that happened to you.

Angela

We ask that those of you attending this session sit with a concept for a moment. Take what you know about adoption and set those thoughts to the side for a moment. We ask you to think of adoption in a new way – as an identity instead of a finite event.

If adoption is viewed as an event, then one assumes closure will happen.

If adoption is an identity, then the goal becomes a sense of Self that is firmly rooted and strong enough to bear full weight of the story, yet remains flexible. Renee will now talk more about Adoption as an Identity, rather than an event

SLIDE 9

A FRAMEWORK FOR UNDERSTANDING

Renée

We are about to walk through the framework I built to make sense of what I was hearing in the data, and what I have lived myself.

It has three layers. I want to name them now so you can hold them as we go.

The first layer is the developmental context. The conditions adoption creates that shape a person over time, whether or not anyone is talking about them.

The second layer is the settled self. How most adoptees move through most days, when adoption is not in the foreground.

The third layer is what happens when something activates. A milestone, a loss, a question that surfaces. Adoption moves back to the center of attention.

Before I share the findings, I want to name something about the design of this study, because it matters for how you receive what comes next.

Our fifteen participants are predominantly same-race domestic adoptees. Nine women and six men. Mostly white, with two Black women whose experiences add important variation. That said, the sample does not include transracial adoptees in the conventional sense or international adoptees. This was a deliberate methodological choice. I wanted to look at the base of adoption. The structural conditions that exist in every adoption regardless of race, culture, or pathway. Without those conditions being entangled with the additional complexities that come with transracial or international adoption. Same-race domestic adoption is sometimes called the invisible adoption. The family looks like a biological family from the outside. There are no visible markers of difference. So the structural conditions of adoption show up without being layered with racial isolation, language loss, or cultural disconnection.

That is what this study is. The bones of adoption.

If you came up through transracial or international adoption, what I share over the next hour applies. The framework holds. But your experience also includes layers that this study did not directly examine. Those are real and they deserve their own attention. If anything I say today does not fully capture your experience, it is because there is more to your experience than this study could hold.

I want to ground this in something specific from our data. The most striking finding in our study was that adoption identity is not resolved in childhood. It continues to develop and resurface across the lifespan, returning at developmental milestones. Fourteen of fifteen participants described this directly. What our codebook calls a near-universal pattern.

That number is what made me realize I needed a framework that could hold a lifespan, not a moment.

SLIDE 10

A FRAMEWORK FOR UNDERSTANDING

Renée

I want to give you a picture of what third layer – activation – looks like. A birthday. A DNA test. Becoming a parent. A stranger asking if your kids look like their grandparents.

These moments are the third layer in motion. Adoption was not in the foreground a minute ago. Now it is

And once it is, something has to happen. The person has to do something with what just surfaced.

There are four ways that tend to go.

Sometimes it gets integrated, woven into the larger story of who you are.

Sometimes it gets stuck in one place and stays there.

Sometimes it gets pushed back down, and the moment passes without anything moving.

And sometimes it pulls the whole story apart for a while before anything new can be built.

We will come back to those. For now, just hold that activation always asks something of the person. It has to be reckoned with, even if the response is to look away

One thing to add before we move on. These four pathways are not stages and they are not a sequence.

Most adoptees move through all four across a lifetime. Different events land in different places.

The same adoptee might be integrating reunion while suppressing birthdays while a sibling discovery pulls the whole story apart, all in the same year.

And the same kind of event lands differently at different ages.

A birthday at twelve gets pushed back down. A birthday at thirty-five gets integrated. A birthday at fifty pulls the story apart.

The pathway depends on the event, what else is happening in the life, what supports are present, and how much of the work has already been done.

So this is not a diagnosis. It is a map of how an activation moment can land.

The point is not to land in the right place every time. The point is to recognize which place you are in, and to know that it is not permanent.

SLIDE 11

A FRAMEWORK FOR UNDERSTANDING

Renée

Picture a tree. Any tree.

The shape that tree has, the way its trunk leans, where its branches reach, the depth of its roots, all of that is shaped by three things.

First, the climate.

The climate shapes the tree before the tree has any awareness of it. You do not feel climate moment to moment. You feel weather. Climate is just the conditions inside which you grew.

For an adoptee, the climate is the structural fact of adoption itself, and that climate has specific features. Four of them keep showing up in the lives of the adoptees in our study.

The separation. The unanswered questions. Not seeing yourself reflected, not in faces, not in mannerisms, not in family stories about who you take after. The expectation of gratitude.

These four are what the adoption climate is made of. They were there before you could name them, and they shaped you whether or not anyone talked about them out loud.

Second, the tree itself.

This is the self. The person who grew within those conditions. And here is what I want to be careful about, because this is where the trauma frame and our frame can diverge. The tree is not damaged. The tree is exactly what it became in the conditions it was given. A tree on a windswept ridge grows differently than a tree in a sheltered valley. Neither one is broken. They are both expressions of what was possible in their conditions.

That distinction matters. If you are an adoptee, you have probably been told at some point that you are damaged or wounded. And if you are a parent, you may have wondered whether something inside your child is broken. I want to offer a different reading. Your child grew in a particular climate. That growth has a shape. The shape is not pathology. It is information.

Third, the weather.

Weather is the activation events. The storm that comes through. A birthday. Becoming a parent. A DNA test. A death. A reunion. The weather does not create weakness in the wood. It finds what was structurally present all along. That is why a milestone can feel so big, so suddenly. The weather did not put it there. The climate did. The weather just made it impossible to ignore.

I want to anchor this in the data before we move on. Twelve of fifteen participants in our study described persistent fear of abandonment or rejection sensitivity. Hypervigilance to social cues. Pre-emptive withdrawal. Difficulty trusting that people will stay. That fear is not personality. It is what the climate built. This tells us this is not idiosyncratic. It is structural.

So when we map this onto the framework, climate is the primary layer, the developmental context. The tree on an ordinary day is the middle layer, the settled arrangement, the way most adoptees move through most days. Weather is the engaged layer, the activation events, what brings adoption back into the foreground.

SLIDE 12

A DISTINCTION WORTH MAKING

Renée

Many of you came in fluent in the language of adoption as trauma. That language has done real work. It has gotten resources to children who needed them. It has trained therapists. It has given adoptees permission to name what they could not name before. I am not arguing against any of that.

What I am offering is the distinction at the top of the slide. Loss is not necessarily trauma. But it is loss.

This is grounded in our data. Eleven of fifteen participants in our study said directly that adoption begins with loss, and the adoptive family, however loving, does not erase that loss. That is one of the dominant findings in our study. It sits underneath everything we are about to talk about.

Here is what the distinction does in real adoptee lives. Participants varied widely in how they related to the trauma label. Some embraced it. Some refused it. Some held it lightly. The interviewee on the right of the slide is talking about his brother, who does not relate to adoption as identity at all. He is clear that this is not denial. It is just who he is.

That variation is real. And when the field defaults to trauma as the only frame, it erases the adoptees who do not recognize themselves in that word. There are a lot of them.

If you are a parent, you do not have to decide whether your child is traumatized. That is not your job, and it was never going to be your job. What you have to do is make space for whatever is present. Sometimes that is loss. Sometimes that is trauma. Sometimes it is both. Your job is to leave room for it, not to label it.

If you are an adoptee, you do not have to decide either. You do not have to call it trauma to take it seriously. You do not have to refuse the word trauma to be valid. Whatever name fits your experience, the loss underneath is real, and it deserves your own attention before it deserves anyone else's label.

The absence of trauma does not mean the absence of loss. Both deserve a witness. That is what I want you holding when you walk out of here.

SLIDE 13

THE FRAMEWORK

Renee

I just walked you through the three layers of the framework. Developmental Context. Settled self. Activation. The layers tell you how the framework is structured. The three domains on this slide tell you where you actually see the framework show up in life.

Three places where the adoption structure makes itself felt.

The first is identity and meaning-making. Who am I, and where do I come from. For most people, that question gets answered automatically. The story of where you came from is just there. For adoptees, the question stays open, sometimes for a whole lifetime. We construct a coherent self-story out of incomplete information. That work is not a sign of disturbance. It is a reasonable response to a real structural condition.

The second is connection and belonging. Do I fit here. Am I claimed. Is this really mine. Belonging is not just about feeling loved. It is about feeling legible, knowable, recognizable in the family you are part of.

This is where our data was strongest. Belonging difficulty showed up across every relational context for thirteen of fifteen participants. Not just in family. In friendships. In romantic relationships. In workplaces. In the question of whether they belonged in their own bodies. It was not situational. It was continuous. That continuity is what makes belonging the most reliable indicator that the adoption structure is at work in someone's life.

There is a sub-finding worth naming. Four of fifteen described what I call internal exclusion. Externally included, accepted, treated well, and still walled off internally. As one participant said, "On the outside I was included and never treated differently. It was all just inside." Belonging difficulty does not always look like rejection. Sometimes it looks like a person who is loved and still cannot let themselves feel claimed.

The third is storytelling and narrative. What is the story of my life, and how do I tell it. For adoptees, the story has gaps. Sometimes it has competing versions. Adoptees are often asked to tell their story in social situations that other people get to skip. Every adoptee in this room knows the small calculation that runs in your head before you answer.

I want to give you an example of what these three domains look like when they are all activated at once, because in real adoptee life they rarely show up alone.

I am in a strange place right now in my own family. I am a mother. I am a grandmother. And I am still in between. Between the adoptive family I was estranged from, a tenuous reunion with my first mother, and a new family forming around my sons and grandchildren. I do not sit cleanly inside any of them.

The line of mothers behind me is not a clean line. That is identity. That is belonging. That is storytelling. All three. In the present tense. Not something I resolved in my twenties. Something I am living right now.

SLIDE 14

A NOTE ON FOSTER CARE

Renée

I want to take a minute here for the foster parents and the former foster youth in this room, because everything we have been describing has a different texture for you.

The structure is the same. The four climate conditions are present. But the terrain is more complex.

Our study had fifteen adoptees in it, and five of them came through foster care or child welfare removal before adoption. So the framework was tested on adoptees who came up through foster care, not just on adoptees placed at birth. The four climate conditions held across both pathways, with more complexity in the foster care subset.

One pattern worth naming. The threat of return language came up in four interviews. The phrase, "I'm gonna send you back where you came from," or some variation of it. Three of those four came through foster care or child welfare removal before adoption. The threat is not abstract for a foster youth. They have already been moved. The threat lands on a body that knows the threat is real.

I want to tell you something about my own path here. I did not actually understand what foster care meant until I became a CASA volunteer as an adult and watched it from the outside. Sitting in courtrooms, reading case files, walking alongside children who were living what I had lived, I started to see for the first time what had actually happened to me. The fact had been there. The meaning had not.

That is something I want every foster parent in this room to hold. Your child may carry the facts of their story without yet understanding the meaning of it. That gap can last decades. It does not mean they are in denial. It means meaning takes time, and in foster care, the meaning is harder to assemble than in most adoption stories, because there is more to assemble.

A few things to know about how the framework lands differently in foster care. Multiple placements mean the self-story has been interrupted more than once. Bio family is often still in the picture, which means the child is not grieving a clean absence. They are navigating loyalty, love, anger, and hope all at once. And for young people aging out, the unmet need is not housing. It is belonging. Housing is measurable. Belonging is harder to fund and is what they are actually missing.

If you came up through foster care yourself, I want you to know I see you in this room. The story you are carrying is more complicated than most adoption frameworks know how to hold. Everything we are saying today applies to you. And there is more underneath that we are not going to get to in this hour.

If you are a foster parent, what I am asking is this. Hold the complexity. The relationship is not tidy. The story is not tidy. The meaning takes time. Make space for all of it without needing it to resolve.

[Brief pause. Hand to Angela for Part Two.]

SLIDE 15

PART TWO

Angela

We are entering Part Two. Renée just walked you through the framework. The climate. The settled self. The activation events. Three layers that hold together.

Now we want to show you what those activation events actually look like in adoptee lives. Real moments. Real voices.

The next four slides are about milestones.

The dates and life events that bring adoption back into the foreground.

We will give you the framework, and then we will give you the participants in their own words.

Some of these voices may sound like your child. Some may sound like you.

Some may name something you have been carrying that you have not heard named before.

This is where the framework becomes felt.

SLIDE 16

THE MILESTONE MOMENTS

Angela

So why milestones? Because milestones are when the gaps become visible.

Most of the rituals in life — birthdays, graduations, weddings, the birth of a child — are built on assumptions.

The assumption that you know who you are and where you came from. The assumption that the family in the room is the whole family.

The assumption that the day has one story.

For adoptees, those assumptions do not hold up. And that is what makes milestones particular for us.

This slide names two of the places where the assumptions break.

The first is identity.

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

For most people, that answer is just available, easily accessible. They know the story of the day they were born. They have a medical history. They look like someone in their family.

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

The questions that everyone else gets to skip.

The second is 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.

Who is in the photos. Who gives the toast. Who is the real grandmother. Who is listed in the obituary when a family member dies.

For foster kids and adoptees whose bio family is still present, milestones can put competing loyalties on a collision course in front of everyone.

The milestones we are about to walk through are moments where these two things — identity and belonging — show up not as abstract questions but as something the adoptee has to actually navigate.

SLIDE 17

THE MILESTONE MOMENTS

Angela

This slide is one of the most important findings from our research. Thirteen of fifteen participants said something about belonging.

Three different ways of saying the same thing.

Three different people. Three different lives. Three different decades. The same underlying concept..

I want to put weight on what this actually means. When you do qualitative research, you are looking for patterns across stories that are very different from each other. These three participants did not know each other. They were placed in different decades. They had different adoptive families, different reunion outcomes, different lives. And when we sat with all fifteen interviews, this same undercurrent surfaced in thirteen of them.

Belonging difficulty was not situational. It was not about a particular relationship that had gone wrong. It was a continuous undercurrent across all relational domains. Family. Friendships. Romantic relationships. Workplaces. Their own bodies. That is what makes belonging the most reliable indicator that the adoption structure is at work in someone's life. It is not what shows up sometimes. It is what runs underneath.

This is not a symptom. It is not pathology. It is the adoption structure doing what the adoption structure does. The first relational rupture taught the body something about belonging, and the body never quite stopped paying attention to the question.

If you are an adoptive parent in this room, I want you to hold something. Your child may be deeply loved, deeply welcomed, deeply rooted in your family, and still carrying this undercurrent. The two things are not contradictions. They sit alongside each other.

If you are an adoptee in this room, what I want you to hear is that you are not alone in this and you are not making it up. The thing you have been carrying that nobody else seemed to feel. Others have been carrying it too. And what you are carrying is real.

SLIDE 18

STONE: BIRTHDAYS

Angela

A birthday is not just a birthday for an adoptee.

For most people, a birthday is a celebration of the day you were born.

The story of the day is known.

The people who were there are usually still in your life, or have been part of the story you grew up hearing.

The cake, the candles, the photos, all of it sits on top of a known beginning. For an adoptee, the day you were born is often a day you do not have the story of.

You may not know who was in the room. You may not know what time it was. You may not know what your first mother was feeling, or what she was facing, or whether she got to hold you.

So the anniversary of that day lands differently. It is the celebration the adoptive family has built.

And it is also, underneath, the anniversary of a separation that nobody else in the room is marking.

Interviewee #7 said it powerfully:

[Read the quote on the slide.] "It's being relinquished all over again every year." Interviewee 7.

That is the line that will not leave me. Every year. Every birthday.

The same loss, surfacing again, on the same day everyone else is throwing a party.

For me, my birthday has always been a sad day. So sad that I had asked friends to never acknowledge it or give me gifts. I wanted that date to not exist at all.

I want to add something specific about finalization days. Three of fifteen participants in our study described what some families call 'gotcha days' as offensive. Not because they did not love their adoptive families. Because the framing of the day as purely positive imposed a single story on a day that was, for them, also a loss. The adoption was real. The loss was also real. And being asked to celebrate one without acknowledging the other felt like being asked to perform an emotion they did not fully have.

What a parent can do here is not big. Notice the date. Do not assume the day is just a celebration. You do not have to ruin the cake. You can just acknowledge, even with one sentence in a card or at breakfast, that you know today carries more than one story. That sentence does more than you think.

If you are an adoptee, I want to name something for you. If your birthday has been hard, or your finalization day has been hard, or any other day that is supposed to be celebratory has felt heavy, you are not ungrateful and you are not broken. The day carries more than one story for you. That is not a problem to fix. That is just the truth of the day. Two things can be true at the same time.

SLIDE 19

MILESTONE: BECOMING A PARENT

Renée

Becoming a parent is one of the moments where the adoption framework activates. In our study, this was a moderate but striking pattern. Five of fifteen participants named having a biological child as a catalyst. Either for searching for biological family, or for grounding their own story. That is one third of the sample. Not universal, but consistent.

What activates is the identity domain. The medical history gaps that suddenly matter. The realization that this small person in your arms is the first body in your family line you have ever been able to study. The question of what your own mother experienced when she was pregnant with you, and the gap where that answer should be.

I want to be honest about my own version. I had my sons partly because I was trying to fill a hole that adoption had left. I did not know I was doing that at the time. I knew it later. I was also in tenuous reunion with my first mother when I had them. Birth and early motherhood activated something I could not explain. The body remembers what the mind cannot reach. The question of who I am had only been quiet for a while. Becoming a mother brought it back.

This activated differently for the male participants in our study too. One male interviewee told me his adoption did not really activate until he had his own children. The pattern is not about pregnancy or birth. It is about becoming a parent.

I want to name something else. Becoming a parent can activate adoption in ways that go well beyond reflective curiosity. For some adoptees, it can surface mental health symptoms that need real clinical attention. The published literature is clear that adoptees have higher rates of mental health crisis, including in the perinatal period and the early years of parenting. If you are an adoptee in this room and becoming a parent has been hard in ways that surprised you, what you are experiencing is not unusual, and it is worth bringing to a clinician who understands adoption.

There is also a counter-pattern. Six of fifteen participants in our study were childless by choice, and adoption was explicitly part of why. The reasons varied. Some described not wanting to repeat what was done to them. Some described not having the family infrastructure that makes parenting feel doable. Becoming a parent activated adoption for some adoptees. Choosing not to become a parent activated it for others. Both are part of the data.

SLIDE 20

MILESTONE: FINDING BIOLOGICAL FAMILY

Renée

This is Interviewee 44, on finding a biological sibling later in life. She met this brother at forty. Forty years of looking at every face and seeing no echo of her own.

What she described has a name. Genetic mirroring. The physical experience of resembling biological family, of seeing your face in someone else's, of being told you look like a relative. In our study, nine of fifteen participants described genetic mirroring as profoundly affirming. That is most of the participants who reunited. One said it gave her the kind of status everyone else just takes for granted. Status. The kind everyone else takes for granted.

Not seeing yourself reflected in anyone around you is one of the four climate conditions. It is one of the four things that shapes the tree. And for many adoptees, it is invisible. It is just the air. You do not know what it is to be without it until something resolves it, and then you feel the weight of having carried it.

If this is the weight in same-race adoption, where the mirror absence is invisible to everyone except the adoptee, imagine the weight when the absence is visible. When every stranger comments on it. When the family photo announces the difference before anyone speaks. Transracial and international adoptees carry this same climate condition with another layer on top.

If you are a parent, the practical takeaway here is small but real. The mirror your child did not have is real. Naming the absence out loud, instead of acting as if it does not matter, is one of the most concrete things you can do. You cannot fix the absence. You can refuse to pretend it is not there.

If you are an adoptee, the takeaway is different. The mirror you did not have was not your fault, and the wanting was not strange. If you have found people who reflect you back, in any form, hold onto them. If you have not yet, the wanting is information, not pathology. It is one of the things the climate built into you, and it is asking for something real.

SLIDE 21

MILESTONE: MIDLIFE AND THE GRATITUDE NARRATIVE

Renée

Many adoptees spend years inside what one of our participants called the grateful narrative. And then at some point, often in midlife, they have to unpack it.

This is Interviewee 30, age 52. The language she is using comes from adoptee community. Coming out of the fog, the grateful narrative. These are phrases that have lived in adoptee spaces for decades. I work with a more current framework, the Adoptee Consciousness Model from Branco and colleagues, which names this as a developmental movement from a less conscious to a more conscious relationship with adoption identity. Seven of fifteen participants in our study described this pattern directly.

The gratitude narrative is part of what keeps adoptees in the less conscious phase. And the data on this is significant. Eight of fifteen participants described the gratitude expectation as actively damaging. Suppressing curiosity. Suppressing authentic expression. Suppressing identity exploration. Seven of those went further and rejected the gratitude narrative entirely as harmful.

There are also negative cases worth naming. A smaller group within our sample, three participants, described their adoption as positive and expressed authentic, considered gratitude. Those participants exist. The argument is not that gratitude is wrong. The argument is that performative gratitude, gratitude as a social expectation, silences the rest of the experience.

The gratitude narrative is not dishonest. For many adoptees, gratitude is a real feeling. The adoptive family is loved. The life is good. There is genuine appreciation for the people who showed up.

And the gratitude narrative is also incomplete. It is true and incomplete at the same time. Two things can sit next to each other. Love for the adoptive parents, and a desire to know the first family. Appreciation for the life that was given, and grief for the life that was not. These do not cancel each other out.

I noticed across our interviews that several participants did not begin searching until after their adoptive parents had died. They waited. Sometimes for decades. They loved their adoptive parents, and they could not bring themselves to let the wanting be visible while those parents were alive. Some of them found what they were looking for. Some of them found it too late.

If you are a parent and your adult child starts to unpack the gratitude narrative in midlife, that is not a verdict on you. It is development. The self has finally arrived at a place stable enough to ask the harder questions. That is not regression. That is what growth looks like in this particular climate. And if you can give your child permission to ask those questions while you are still here, you are giving them something many adoptees do not get.

If you are an adoptee, the takeaway is different. If you spent years inside the gratitude narrative, that was not weakness. It was a form of love. And the moment you start to unpack it is not a betrayal of anyone. It is your own development asking for room. The grief and the gratitude can both be true. They were always going to both be true.

SLIDE 22

MILESTONE: NAMING THE LOSS

Renée

This is Interviewee 44.

What she is naming is the gap between how the world responds to a mother's death and how the world responds to losing a mother through adoption. When a mother dies, people rally. When a child loses a mother through adoption, the response is "oh, but you were adopted. problem solved." Same kind of loss. Opposite reception. Instead of rallying, people erase what is being mourned.

That is disenfranchised grief. Kenneth Doka named the kinds of grief that society does not give people permission to mourn, and adoption losses were on his list from the start. Pauline Boss's work on ambiguous loss runs alongside that. Both have been describing what adoptees have lived for decades.

There is a specific form of this in our data that deserves naming. It is a double loss. The first loss happens at relinquishment. The second happens when the adoptee searches and finds out the chance to meet has already passed. Four of fifteen participants in our study found their birth mothers too late. As one of them said, "I found her, but she had passed away. I thought I would have some type of feeling. I don't know her." The grief had been there all along, in not knowing her. The death just confirmed it would never be resolved.

What I want you to leave with is this. If you are a parent, you can be the person who does not say "problem solved." You can be the person who hears the loss and lets it be a loss. If you are an adoptee, you can stop waiting for the people around you to recognize what you are carrying. The grief is real whether or not anyone has witnessed it. Finding people who do recognize it is part of the work.

SLIDE 23

WHEN GRIEF SHOWS UP

(Angela)

Name it: disenfranchised grief is when everyone else tells you your grief doesn't make sense. You quickly learn that your grief is not socially accepted like grief from death is.

This slide gives us three ways to name what adoptee grief actually is. Three frames that I think are useful for everyone in this room. The point is not to diagnose anyone. It is to give the grief a name, because what does not get named tends to stay underground.

The first is ambiguous loss. This is grief for something you never fully had and cannot name. The birth family you did not know. The medical history that is not in your file. The face you never saw reflected back. There is no funeral for this kind of loss. There is no day on the calendar where everyone agrees you are allowed to grieve.

The second is disenfranchised grief. This is loss that other people do not validate or even see. Adoptees learn early that this kind of grief does not register the way grief from death registers. People do not know what to do with it. They default to a problem-solved framing, or they minimize, or they change the subject.

Just to name where these terms come from. Disenfranchised grief is from Kenneth Doka, whose work named the kinds of grief that society does not give permission to mourn. Adoption was on his list from the start. Pauline Boss's work on ambiguous loss runs alongside it. Both frameworks have been describing what adoptees have lived for decades

The third is developmental grief. And this one matters because it explains something parents and adoptees both often misunderstand.

When adoption surfaces hard at thirty-five, or fifty-two, or sixty, that is not regression. It is not a wound reopening. It is development doing what development does. The self has finally arrived at a place stable enough to ask the harder questions. That is growth, not failure.

[ANGELA: optional personal anchor. Skip if you prefer.]

The bottom line on the slide is the line we keep coming back to.

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

SLIDE 24

PART THREE

Renée

We are about to talk about something that does not get said out loud often enough. The fear that adoptive and foster parents carry.

The fear that you carry. Some of you have been carrying it for years.

I want to be clear before we go in. This is not a section designed to make any parent in this room feel guilty. The fears we are going to name are reasonable. Most adoptive parents I have talked to have at least one of them. They are not character flaws. They are responses to the structural reality that you took on a child whose first family is not you, and you cannot make that not be true, no matter how much you love them.

What I am going to ask you to do over the next few slides is just to look at the fear honestly. Not fix it. Not justify it. Just let it be visible.

Because what I have learned, both in our research and in my own family, is that the fear that does not get named is the fear that ends up running the show.

SLIDE 25

THE FEAR IN THE ROOM

Renée

The three fears on this slide are real. Parents in this room have been carrying them, often without anyone naming them out loud.

The first is the fear of replacement. The fear that if your child finds the biological family, you become less. Less central. Less needed. Less the parent. The fear that all the love you gave is somehow erased by a relationship you did not get to participate in.

I want to say something about this directly. The fear is reasonable. It is what attachment naturally produces. You are bonded to your child. The thought of someone else holding a primary place in their story is hard. The fear is not pathological. But the fear is also not true. Love does not work that way. We do not ask a parent to choose between their first child and their second child. We do not ask whether they love one more than the other. Love expands. Adoptees do the same thing.

The second is the fear of loyalty. The fear that if your child wants to know about the birth family, they are pulling away from you. That curiosity is somehow a vote against your relationship.

This fear lives in the background of many adoptive families. It is rarely named out loud. But adoptees can sense it. And when they sense it, they suppress the wanting, sometimes for decades, because they do not want to hurt you. So the curiosity goes underground. The wanting does not go away. It just goes quiet, and what comes back later is harder to handle than what would have come back if it had been allowed to live in the open.

The third is the fear of the unknown. What might your child find. What might that mean for them. Will they be okay if the truth turns out to be hard. Will they want you less if they know more.

This fear is the one I want to address most carefully, because I have heard it most often from parents who genuinely do not know what their child will find. It is reasonable. It is human. And it is also the fear that, if you let it sit unaddressed, becomes the silence in your house. The fear of what your child might find becomes the reason your child does not look while you are alive. That cost is higher than the cost of what they might find.

I want to leave you with one piece of data before we move on. Eleven of fifteen participants in our study said their adoptive parents needed to do their own work first. Process their own infertility grief. Examine their motivations for adopting. Work on their own issues. Or that unprocessed material would get transmitted to the child. Eleven of fifteen. The fears are real. The fears are also workable. But they need to be your work, not your child's.

SLIDE 26

THE FEAR IN THE ROOM

Angela

Renée just walked you through three fears that adoptive parents commonly carry. I want to name what happens to a child when those fears do not get named.

When parents cannot hold the fear, adoptees learn to suppress the curiosity. Not because they stopped wondering. Wondering about origins is what every adoptee does. What changes is whether they let the wondering be visible.

A child who senses that asking about birth family upsets or angers their parent will stop asking. They are not stupid. They are paying attention. They notice the shift in your voice when the topic comes up. They notice when you change the subject. They notice when the room gets quieter. And they make a calculation, often without realizing they are making it. They decide that asking is not safe, and they protect the relationship by suppressing the wanting.

That suppression can last decades. And it does not go away.

It surfaces hard at a milestone. A wedding. A child being born. A parent's death. A DNA test. Suddenly the wondering is no longer suppressible, and now everyone is dealing with it under conditions of high stress instead of in conversation when it could have been handled together.

The data from our study confirms this. The adoptees who struggled most with reunion and search later in life were almost always the ones who never felt safe asking questions at home growing up. They had spent decades learning to keep the questions small.

And there is something else from the data worth naming. Seven of fifteen participants said directly that a child's desire to know about biological family has nothing to do with rejecting the adoptive family. As one of them put it, apples and oranges. Both can be loved. Neither cancels the other. Adoptees are telling us this directly. The wanting is not a verdict.

The goal of this slide is not to make any parent feel guilty. The fears are real. We just walked through them. None of that is a moral failing.

The goal is to acknowledge the fear honestly, and still not let it determine what your child is allowed to wonder. That is the work. Holding your own fear without making your child carry it. The cost of the alternative, decades of suppressed wondering that surfaces under bad conditions later, is much higher than the cost of being uncomfortable in a conversation now.

SLIDE 27

Adoption can bring healing, but it does not take away or erase or diminish loss of first family, loss

Angela

I want to read this quote slowly because it captures something that takes most adoptees decades to be able to say.

[Read the quote on the slide.] "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, age 52.

What I want you to hear in this is the both.

Both at the same time.

The healing is real.

The loss is real.

Neither one needing to disappear for the other one to exist.

For adoptees in this room, this is permission. You are allowed to love your adoptive family and grieve your first family in the same breath. Those two things have always been allowed to coexist. The world told you to pick. The truth is, you never had to.

For parents in this room, this is information. When your child grieves the first family, that grief is not a vote against you. It is just the loss being real, alongside the love being real.

SLIDE 28

You really can balance two families. We don't question when parents have a second child whether that

Angela

This is the same participant, Interviewee 30. I think she says something here that adoptive parents in particular need to hear. [

[Read the quote on the slide]: *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.

The reason this analogy lands is that it catches the implicit question many adoptive parents are quietly carrying.

The question of whether their child loving the birth family means loving the adoptive family less.

That math, the math of fixed allocation, is not how love actually works.

We know that with our other children.

We have to know it here too.

Make space for all of that.

SLIDE 29

Arc of Reunion

Renée

I want to give you the arc of reunion, because if you do not know it, you cannot prepare for it. Many adoptive parents I have talked to are caught off guard, not because anything went wrong, but because nobody told them what reunion can look like.

There is no single ending. Reunions do not end the same way for everyone.

A few things from our data are worth naming directly.

The first is what most adoptees who reunited described it as the substantive gift. Faces. Stories. Living relatives instead of imagined ones. Context for who they are. As I described on the genetic mirroring slide earlier, this was profoundly affirming for most who reunited. Reunion does give people something real.

It is also complicated. Six of fifteen participants experienced what our codebook calls reunion honeymoon to secondary abandonment. Initial euphoria, then over time the discovery of complex family dynamics or relational rupture. As one of them put it, "in the beginning it was all kumbaya. Then everything starts coming out."

Four of fifteen described reunion that came on too fast. Birth family members who assumed intimacy that had not been earned. As one of them said, "you don't know me from a hole in the wall. Back off." This is information for adoptees in the room. The pacing of reunion has to be yours.

Reunion is also broader than the birth parent. Several of our participants described siblings as a central part of their reunion experience. For some, a sibling was the easier relationship, the one that carried less expectation. For others, a sibling was where the hardest truths surfaced, including the discovery that some siblings had been kept while they were not. Three of fifteen made that specific discovery. Reunion is rarely with one person. It is with a family system that existed without you, and the system has more people in it than the fantasy usually accounts for.

And reunion is often delayed. Several of our participants did not begin searching until after their adoptive parents had died. They loved their adoptive parents, and they could not bring themselves to let the wanting be visible while those parents were alive. The cost of not making search safe ahead of time is sometimes that your child waits until you are gone.

What can an adoptive parent do? Two things. Both matter.

The first is making the search itself safe. Many adoptees grow up sensing that search would hurt their adoptive parents and quietly suppress the wanting for years. If you can say, early and meant, "I support you searching when you are ready, and I will help if you want help," you remove a barrier that does not need to be there.

The second is the line on the slide. Whatever you find, I will still be here. Together those two things sound like this. You have my support to look. And whatever you find, I am here.

What an adoptee can do.

Be honest with yourself about reunion. It is not a healing event in the way you may be hoping. The gap that adoption opened was not opened by the absence of specific people. It was opened by the separation itself, and meeting the people who were on the other side does not close it.

But reunion still gives you something real. A face. A story. Living people instead of imagined ones. If you go in expecting to be made whole, you may be disappointed. If you go in knowing the original wound stays, you can let the relationship be what it actually is, and what it actually is can still be meaningful.

SLIDE 30

WHAT LIVES INSIDE

Renée

On the left is what many adoptees carry inside. Anger, shame, hurt, the learned expectation of rejection.

Before I walk through any of these, I want to say something about what underlies all of them. Many adoptees are highly sensitive, particularly to anything that looks like rejection, disapproval, or a relationship shifting. That sensitivity is not weakness, and it is not something to fix. It is a nervous system that learned early to stay alert. Adoptees often pick up on small shifts in tone, attention, or mood before anyone names them out loud. That attentiveness was protective once. It does not always feel that way now.

Hold that underneath. The anger, the shame, the hurt, the expectation of rejection, all of it sits on top of a nervous system that has been paying attention for a long time.

I want to call out two of these specifically, because they are the two most parents misread.

Anger is the one most parents see, and it is also the one most parents misread. The anger often does not land on the people who left. It lands on the people who are present. The body does not sort cleanly. The adoptive parents are right there, and the anger has to go somewhere. If your child has been angry at you in ways that do not seem to match what is happening, that is information. It is not bad behavior. It is grief looking for a target.

Shame is the one most parents miss, because shame goes underground. It does not announce itself. It shows up as the kid who never asks for anything. The kid who says they are fine when they are not. The kid who assumes they will be left out, picked last, broken up with. Shame in adoptees is often preverbal. It arrives as a baseline assumption that something is fundamentally wrong with them. It is not true. And it is very hard to dislodge.

The hurt and the expectation of rejection live together. The body learns that love ends, and starts protecting itself from a story it already knows. So in close relationships, your child may pull away first, test, leave before being left. From outside it looks like distance. From inside, it is a body trying to make sure it is never that surprised again.

The right side of the slide is what safe relationships do. I am not going to walk through that list. The line at the bottom is what I want you to leave with.

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

If you are an adoptee, the takeaway is different. You did not invent these feelings, and you are not too much for having them. All of it makes sense. It is what the climate built. The work is not to stop feeling it. The work is to find the relationships, the communities, the therapy, where you can bring it without having to make it smaller first.

SLIDE 31

WHAT ACTUALLY HELPS

Renée

If you are an adoptee, two things matter more than most people realize. Adoptee community and adoption-competent therapy. Both are forms of medicine that no individual relationship can fully replicate. Find both if you can.

This is grounded in our data. Nine of fifteen participants in our study identified the adoptee community as the place they felt most genuinely understood. The space where they did not have to explain themselves. Seven of fifteen explicitly recommended adoptee community connection as a therapeutic resource. As one of them put it, "you don't have to do a lot of explaining when you're in the adoptee triad. Everybody gets it." That is not a minority experience. That is most of the adoptees in our study telling us the same thing.

Eight of fifteen participants explicitly recommended seeking an adoption-competent therapist. Standard clinical training, even good therapy training, does not adequately address adoption's complexity. Our participants told me directly. Find someone who knows.

If you are a parent, your job is to support both. Encourage your child toward adoptee-led spaces. Podcasts, communities, mentorship programs. Do not try to be that for them. You cannot be. And help them find adoption-competent therapy. Ask any therapist before your child sees them, "What is your experience working with adoptees?" The answer tells you everything.

SLIDE 32

PART FOUR

Renée

We are about to do something a little different in this section.

The next four slides have questions for in the chat, and I want you to actually use them.

Not because we need data.

Because some things in adoptive families live underneath for years without ever being named, and the chat is a place where you can name something that has been quiet in your house.

You will not be asked to share aloud.

You will not be put on the spot.

If you want to participate in the chat, your name will be visible, but you do not have to write anything that identifies someone else in your life.

You can write in a way that is true for you without being specific about your family.

Or you can just hold the questions silently.

Either is fine.

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

Not because anyone is hiding them. Because nobody opened the door. That is what this section is for. Opening the door. Just a little.

SLIDE 33

THE CONVERSATIONS THAT DON'T HAPPEN

Angela

Most adoptees have wanted to take a DNA test. Many already have. Many haven't told their parents. And many adoptive parents haven't brought it up.

Not because anyone is hiding anything. Because neither person could tell if it was okay to want what the test might find.

A few things worth naming directly.

The DNA test is not a threat to the relationship. It is a question that has been waiting in the house.

The waiting is the problem, not the test. DNA also changed the timeline.

The arc of reunion that used to take years can collapse into weeks. The reunion arc on the previous slide assumes time. DNA does not give you that time.

And it matters whether the test happens with the parents' knowledge.

Not because parents get veto power — the test is going to happen either way.

It matters because secrecy adds weight to whatever the test reveals, and when the secret comes out later, the adoptive family relationship gets ruptured at exactly the moment the adoptee needs it most stable.

Now I want to bring this into the room. 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?

Take a minute. Write what is true for you. You do not have to name specific people. You can write in general terms or just hold the questions. Either is fine

[ANGELA answer the chat prompt for you]

Thank you for sharing that....We are going to keep going.

SLIDE 34

THE CONVERSATIONS THAT DON'T HAPPEN

Renée

The next silence is one of the hardest, because it is built into the language we have for adoption. And it cuts both ways.

Adoptees feel grateful and grieving at the same time. Grateful for the family they have. Grieving the family they did not. Both real. Both true. Both running every day.

Adoptive parents have their own version. Grateful that they got to be parent and also carrying things they do not feel allowed to say.

Frustration that the birth family takes up so much space in their child's head, even after years of love and presence.

Sadness that they cannot fully close the gap their child is carrying. Sometimes both. But only the gratitude gets social permission.

The grief, the frustration, the longing, all sound ungrateful.

So both sides learn to perform the half of the experience that is acceptable and keep the other half underground.

Two people in the same family, both holding more than the gratitude script allows, both suppressing it, both sensing the other person is doing the same.

And nobody is talking about it.

I want to name something protective before we go to the chat.

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.

wanting is structural. It is not about whether the adoptive family was good enough. It was never going to be a referendum on you.

Chat Prompt

If it were safe to say it, what would you want them to know?

You do not have to share the thing itself. Just write toward what would be there if the conversation were possible.

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?

[Renée answer the chat prompt for her]

SLIDE 35

THE CONVERSATIONS THAT DON'T HAPPEN

Angela

We talked about reunion earlier from a structural angle. I want to come back to it here from a more personal angle, because reunion is one of the things adoptive families most often have unspoken expectations about, and the slide deck cannot do that work alone.

Reunion is rarely what either person imagined. The hope was for a story that resolved something. What often comes is a story that introduces new people, new complications, and sometimes a new kind of loss. The birth parent who could not show up. The relationship that formed and then faded. For some adoptees, the discovery that a sibling was kept while they were relinquished.

Many of the participants in our study described reunion that started well and got harder over time. Initial euphoria, then over time the discovery of complex family dynamics or relational rupture. That is the truth most people do not hear before they go in.

Reunion does not resolve the adoption structure. It introduces new people into it. The cast of characters expands. The structure stays.

[Read the chat prompts.] What had you imagined reunion would look like? What do you imagine now? If you are an adoptive parent, what did you hope reunion would mean for your child? What did you hope it would mean for you? Take a minute. Write what is true, or hold the question.

[Angela: optional - give your own answer to the chat prompt to seed the discussion or fill silence Are you envisioning me typing in chat or saying aloud? I assume typing in chat]

SLIDE 36

THE CONVERSATIONS THAT DON'T HAPPEN

Renée

The last conversation in this section is about specific days.

Some days in your year carry more than one story. Both of them true. Mother's Day. The adoptee's birthday. The finalization anniversary.

These dates ask adoptees to hold grief and gratitude at the same time.

The day is also a day when the people around them — adoptive families, friends, society — are expecting one story to be in the foreground.

Nine of fifteen participants in our study named birthdays as reliably bringing adoption into focus.

Three described finalization days, what some families call gotcha days, as difficult rather than celebratory. Not because the adoption was bad.

Because the day is also the anniversary of a separation that did not get marked.

Most adoptive families move through these days together without naming the second story. Either because no one knew how to open it, or because no one wanted to.

The day arrives, the cake gets cut, the photos get taken, and underneath, two stories are running at the same time, and only one of them is being witnessed.

[Read the chat prompt.] Is there a day in your year that you and your child move through differently, and neither of you quite says why? Take a minute. Write what is true, or hold the question.

[Renée give her answer to the chat]

If needed to move on - The fix is to acknowledge that the day holds more than one thing. A sentence at breakfast. A note in a card. "I know today is also..." That sentence does not change the celebration. It changes whether the second story has to live underground.

SLIDE 37

PART FIVE

Angela

We are at the close.

The last part of this session is about what we want you to leave with. something that will be there in your house, in your conversations, in the way you move through a hard day.

The next slide gives you nine things. Three to notice. Three to say. Three to stop saying.

SLIDE 38

WHAT TO TAKE HOME

Angela

Things to notice.

Milestone dates on the calendar. Birthdays. Finalization days. Mother's Day. Notice them in advance, not in the moment when something is already hard. Maybe put a reminder on your calendar a week ahead or a week after to reflect.

Withdrawal or mood shifts at holidays. Holidays put family structure in focus. If your child gets quieter, more irritable, more withdrawn around holidays, that is information. Not bad behavior.

When your child stops asking questions. This is the one most parents miss. A child who used to wonder out loud and stops has not stopped wondering. They have learned the wondering is not safe to bring to you.

Things to say.

"I wonder about that too sometimes." This sentence tells your child that wondering is allowed.

"You're allowed to feel more than one thing." Adoptees often grow up with the implicit message that they have to pick a side. This sentence breaks that.

"We can make space for all of it." This is your standing offer. Not a one-time conversation.

Things to stop saying. Each one ties back to the framework Renée walked you through earlier.

"You should just be grateful." Even soft versions slip in. "You have it so good." "At least you have us." Those are gratitude pressure, and gratitude pressure deepens the climate, not softens it. The expectation of gratitude is one of the four climate conditions.

"We are your real family." The impulse comes from love, but the word real makes the birth family unreal, and your child knows the birth family is real. Try "we are your family" or "this is your family too." Drop the word real.

"You have a great life. Why does this matter?" Because it matters. The climate is the climate, regardless of how good the weather has been. A great life and unresolved adoption questions coexist. Your child needs you to know they coexist.

That is the take-home list.

SLIDE 39

The goal is not an adoption that never surfaces.

Angela

I want to leave you with this.

The goal is not an adoption that never surfaces.

That is not available to anyone in this room. That just is not reality. Reality is that adoption is always present, just sometimes it takes center stage and sometimes it blends into the background.

The climate is the climate. The structural conditions are present. They are going to surface.

The goal is an adoptee who has enough room to engage with adoption honestly when it does.

And a parent steady enough to hold it with them.

That is what we have been building toward for the last ninety minutes.

Not closure. Not resolution.

A relationship strong enough to keep being a relationship, even when the hard things show up.

"Make space for all of that." Interviewee 30, age 52.

Six words. Make space for all of that. The grief and the gratitude.

The first family and the adoptive family.

The questions and the answers and the questions that will not have answers.

The birthday that is also an anniversary.

The reunion that is transformative and painful.

All of it.

Make space for all of that.

Thank you for being here. Renée and I will take questions in the chat.

SLIDE 40

Adoptee Resources

Angela

SLIDE 41

Adoptive Parent Resources

Angela –