families rising
Adoption & Foster Care CONFERENCE
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1I — Adoption and Life's Milestones: Identity, Connection, and Growth

· Renee Murphy, Clinician, The Children and Parents Project

· Angela Christianson, MS, Antioch University

Adoption and Life's Milestones

Identity, Connection, and Growth
What adult adoptees want social workers and families to know

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Renée Murphy
Angela Christianson
Antioch University

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Let's Start in the Chat

- **Who's here?** Social worker or caseworker, family and youth services, adoptive parent, foster parent, kinship caregiver, adoptee, birth family. Whatever fits.
- **And one more:** When does adoption come up in your house, or on your caseload? A date, a question, a mood. Type whatever comes to mind.
- **Renee: A little about me:** I'm an adult adoptee. I went into foster care at 4, lived in two foster homes, and was adopted at 6. I was estranged from my adoptive family before they died, and I’m in reunion (ish) with my birth family.
- **Angela:** Relinquished at birth, placed with my adoptive family at 1 month old and the adoption was finalized 18 months later. My relationship with my adopters is complicated. I am in touch with limited adoptive family. In reunion with my genetic family on my mother’s side only.

What We Hope You Leave With

- **Adoption doesn't finish in childhood.** It comes back at different points across a whole life, and a lot of those points are predictable.
- **Kids stop asking about their adoption to protect you. Don't wait for the question. Bring it up first, and bring it up more than once. Keep bringing it up.**
- **Wanting to search doesn't mean something went wrong at home.** 14 of the 15 adults in our study searched, including the one with the happiest adoption.

Who We Talked To

- 15 adult adoptees, ages 30s to 70s. All were placed as infants or young children with families of the same race: 13 in the U.S., one in Canada, and one in the UK. Four came through foster care.
- Everyone in our study was placed with a same-race family. For transracial adoptees, all of this is true, with race on top of it.
- Two of the three researchers are adult adoptees. The third is an adoptive mom.
- We asked the adoptees to look back across their whole lives. What came up, and when? What do they wish the adults around them had known?

Finding 1: The Loss Comes Before the Family

The loss comes before the family, and it is hard to name.

- 11 of 15
- The loss happened before the adoption. A good family doesn't undo it. And when everyone expects gratitude, it gets very hard to say out loud.

“Adoption can bring healing, but it, in and of itself, does not... take away or erase, or diminish... loss of first family” (Anne, 50s, adopted from foster care).

“I felt... really an obligation to them not to be too inquisitive about my origins” (Laura, 60s).

At home: You didn't cause this loss, and you can't fix it. You **can** make it safe to talk about.

In your work: Treat the loss as real even when the placement is going well.

Finding 2: Identity Is Never Finished

Identity is never finished.

- 14 of 15, with ages spanning four decades
- Adoption isn't something a child gets through and then it's over. It comes back at 15, at 30, at 50. That isn't going backward. That's how it works.

“I'm looking for something that I don't know how, or where, to find” (Riley, 40s).

“I did exist for a while... in the 'I'm so grateful... that I was adopted' narrative... and then had to unpack that” (Anne, 50s, adopted from foster care).

At home: Circling back to adoption doesn't mean the earlier work failed.

In your work: A youth circling back to adoption at 15 isn't a placement failing. It's part of figuring out who they are.

Finding 3: Belonging as a Wound

Belonging as a wound carried into every room.

- 13 of 15
- Three themes show up again and again: looking fine on the outside while staying guarded inside, leaving before you can be left, and earning a place by being useful.

“A deep sense of… not belonging always follows me” (Michael, 60s).

“On the outside, [I was] included, and… never treated differently… It was all just… inside” (Sloane, 40s, adopted from foster care).

At home: A kid who seems fine may be working hard to stay that way.

In your work: The easy, compliant kid on your caseload may need the closest look.

Finding 4: The Pull to Search

The search for origins pulls at *nearly everyone, no matter how good the adoptive family was*.

- 14 of 15
- The person in our study with the most positive feelings about her adoption **still searched**. Searching is not a sign of a bad placement. It is a search for self.
- Part of it is wanting to see your face in someone else's, to *"look at someone else and see a little bit of a mirror image" (Avery, 50s).*

"From all those years of feeling like I didn't come from anywhere... who am I? who am I?... It gave me an identity, really. I knew who I was. It's that profound, really" (Elizabeth, 60s, after finding her birth parents).

At home: Their curiosity isn't a vote against you.

In your work: Supporting search and contact isn't a threat to permanency.

One Way to Think About It

- **Adoption is the setting a child grows up in.** Kids who aren't adopted get the big questions answered for them: you look like your dad, you come from here, of course you belong. For adopted kids, those questions stay open while they're growing up.
- **Most of the time, adoption is settled.** It sits in the background and life goes on. That's normal. It isn't denial.
- **Then something opens the door.** A birthday, a school project, a DNA test, someone getting sick. Adoption moves to the front again.
- **What happens next depends on the adults around them.** Is it safe to bring up? Do people talk about it? Is there information to work with? Is there support?

What Opens the Door

- **Days on the calendar.** Birthdays, Mother's Day, Father's Day, adoption day, holidays.
- **Big life changes.** Starting school, puberty, moving, leaving home, a first serious relationship, having a baby.
- **Things between people.** A new sibling or placement, a breakup, a parent getting sick or dying, contact from birth family.
- **Things that make them notice.** A family tree assignment, a genetics unit, a TV show, a friend's DNA kit, meeting another adoptee.
- **The body and health.** Medical forms with blanks, a new diagnosis, looking in the mirror and not seeing anyone.
- **In the chat:** Which of these is coming up for you in the next few months?

What You Might See at Home

- **Fine on the outside, guarded inside.** Good grades, no trouble, and nobody knows what they're carrying.
- **Leaving first.** Ending friendships suddenly, pushing you away before a move or a change, picking a fight before a visit.
- **Earning their place.** Always helpful, apologizing frequently, anxious when there's nothing to do.
- **A hard time every year with no clear reason.** The birthday, the holidays, the same month every year.
- **They stop asking.** Quiet about adoption doesn't mean done with it.

“I had a mask on that meant I smiled and I fit in and I was happy and happy to be there and grateful” (Deb Flanagan, interview project).

Why Kids Stop Asking

- **Kids watch your face.** If a question about birth family makes you tense or sad, they notice. Many stop asking. They didn't stop wondering. They're protecting you.
- **Kids protect workers too.** A youth may stay quiet about birth family to protect the placement.
- **Some people in our study held it in for decades.** They didn't search or grieve until a parent died or they were grown and gone. They did it out of love for their parents.
- **Most parents carry a fear.** Will they still need me if they find their birth family? Does their curiosity mean I wasn't enough? These fears are normal. Kids can feel them.
- **So go first.** Bring it up before they do. Bring it up more than once. Let them see you can handle it.

“I think my parents were even told... if they have questions, like answer them. Like, how am I going to bring it up? ... I don't want you to get rid of me too” (Christina, interview project).

Words That Keep the Door Open

- **Instead of** “You're so lucky.” **Try** “What's being adopted like for you right now?”
- **Instead of** “Why do you want to know?” **Try** “I'm glad you asked. Let's see what we can find out.”
- **Instead of** “But we love you.” **Try** “Tell me more.”
- **Instead of** “Your birth mom must have loved you very much.” **Try** “What do you wonder about her?”
- **Instead of** “Tell me about your family.” **Try** “Who are the important people in your life?”
- **When it lands wrong:** “I've been thinking about what I said when you asked about your birth mom. I don't think I said it well. Can we try again?”

“Telling me that I should be grateful is the most hurtful and anger-inducing thing that I deal with... It's kind of mean even if it has good intention” (Bear, interview project).

Search, DNA, and Reunion

- **DNA tests changed the picture.** Kids and teens can find birth family on their own now, sometimes by accident. It's better if they don't have to do it in secret.
- **Reunion has a shape.** Hope, then contact, then it gets complicated. Sometimes there's a new loss: a birth parent who can't show up, siblings who were kept, news nobody expected.
- **The window closes.** Birth parents get older and die. Four people in our study found their birth mothers after it was too late.
- **Keep the record.** The names, photos, letters, and medical information you collect now are what an adult adoptee will look for later. Pass them on.

“When I did finally find my mother, she had passed away... that year when I turned 40 is when I started looking for her, and she had passed away” (Frances, 60s, adopted from foster care).

Reunion “felt like a drug going into my system when I first got into reunion and probably about the first nine months until it turned not great” (Molly, interview project).

For Foster and Kinship Families

- **The same things are true, with more going on.** Birth family may still be in the picture, with visits, calls, and changes while the child is trying to settle.
- **Don't make them choose.** Kids can love more than one family. Loving one doesn't take anything from the other.
- **Kinship has its own knots.** When grandma is also mom, or an aunt is raising her sister's child, loyalty gets complicated for everyone.
- **Hold on to the story.** Life books, photos, names, and the reasons for each move. They will want these later.

“I'm now seeing all the documentations that I had never actually seen on me, and on my mom, and my family... pieces of my memory are now being connected by documents” (Erin Boyd, interview project, on reading her own case file).

Find Them Other Adoptees

- For 9 of the 15 people in our study, other adoptees were the one place they never had to explain themselves.
- This works for kids too: adoptee mentors, camps, groups, even one friend who gets it.
- **Adoptees Connect** runs peer support groups across the U.S. The Adoptee Mentoring Society connects young adoptees with adult adoptee mentors.
- You can't give them this one yourself, and that's okay.

“It can normalize us to hear from 20 other adoptees who are like, oh, I do that too. I do that too. I do that too” (Catherine, interview project).

In Their Own Words

A short montage of adult adoptees from the interview project, speaking in their own words, was shown during the session.

To hear more from them, register for the free course: adopteeresearch.org/curriculum

Activity: Maya

- Maya is 12. She was adopted at 18 months through foster care. Her parents talk about adoption when she brings it up.
- This month: a family tree assignment at school, her grandma is in the hospital, and her best friend got a DNA kit for her birthday.
- Maya has been snapping at dinner. Last night she asked if her birth mom has other kids. Her mom said, “Why do you ask?” Maya said, “Never mind.”
- **In the chat:**
  - What opened the door for Maya?
  - What might “never mind” mean?
  - What could her mom say tonight?
  - What could her caseworker or post-adoption worker do?

Debrief

- Nothing about Maya's adoption changed this month. What did change?
- “Why do you ask?” is a normal question. What might Maya have heard?
- Her mom can revisit it. What would that sound like?
- Her worker can help the family see the next door coming. What would that take?

What Adoptees Asked For

Adoptees already know what good support looks like.

- When we asked what helps, they told us.

“More than anything... it's really important that an... adopted person is... seen and heard, for real. Not seen and heard in the way that people want to see them and hear them. But in the way [they] themselves want to be seen and heard” (Daniel, 40s, adopted from foster care).

Michael (60s) talked about the shell many adoptees carry, and the patience it takes: “Work around that until... maybe that titanium tank starts to lower a little bit.”

Thank you

- **The research:** adopteeresearch.org
- **Your handout:** Adoption and Life's Milestones, a one-page guide to the moments you can see coming and the words that keep the door open.
- **For therapists and clinical social workers:** adopteeresearch.org/curriculum, a free self-paced course in adoption-competent counseling. (pilot)
- Questions?