

REVISED AND UPDATED

the WHOLE LIFE

ADOPTION BOOK

REALISTIC ADVICE FOR BUILDING A HEALTHY ADOPTIVE FAMILY

JAYNE E. SCHOOLER
& THOMAS C. ATWOOD

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Dedication

From Jayne

To David,

My best friend and delight of my life

From Tom

To Eileen and Chris,

My precious and loving family

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

In the years since the first edition of *The Whole Life Adoption Book* was published, not only has the American culture grown in its understanding of the beauties and challenges of adoption, but also I, as an adoption professional committed to the training and education of adoptive and foster families and professionals, have truly grown. That growth has come through the encouragement and support of colleagues for over twenty years.

I first began my work in adoption at Warren County Children Services, Lebanon, Ohio, in 1986, coming to that position as a former educator and foster parent. I experienced incredible support then as the first edition of *The Whole Life Adoption Book* was being written. It was the executive director, Mr. R. D. Burchwell; my supervisor, Mr. Steve Kelhoffer; and many other colleagues who encouraged me in that very first effort.

Since becoming a full-time national and international adoption educator, I have had the privilege of working with many individuals from the Institute of Human Services in Columbus, Ohio, and being part of the Ohio Child Welfare Training Program. I would like to express my deep appreciation to the following colleagues at IHS:

- Dr. Ronald Hughes and Dr. Judith Rycus, founders and directors of IHS, who gave me a place to serve and a rich environment in which to learn
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- Norma Ginther, Lois Tyler, Pam Severs, and Dr. Denise Goodman, who mentored and encouraged me and from whom I have learned much and continue to do so

I am indebted to many other colleagues from IHS and other adoption professionals from around the country whose paths I only briefly crossed but who influenced and changed my career nonetheless. I am also indebted to all the regional coordinators for the Ohio Child Welfare training program, who gave me a place to improve my training skills and to serve.

One of the most enjoyable experiences of working on the updated version of this book has been to work alongside a coauthor and two other contributing authors for the first time and to team up again with the original editor of *The Whole Life Adoption Book*. I would like to thank Thomas Atwood, president of National Council For Adoption, for joining me as coauthor. Thanks also to Chuck Johnson, NCFCA vice president of Training and Agency Services, and Nicole Ficere Callahan for their willingness to assist with this project and for all the expert additions to the book. Because of their support, *The Whole Life Adoption Book* was updated to meet the needs of adopting families in the twenty-first century.

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A huge thank you goes to my editor, Traci Mullins, who captured the vision for this book over fifteen years ago. It was my incredible privilege to work with Traci on the first edition, and it was once again my privilege to work with her on this updated version.

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Fifteen years ago, I commented in the acknowledgments that my then sixteen-year-old daughter hoped to pursue a degree in social work. Kristy Schooler Matheson is now a social worker as well as a wife to Rick and mom to two awesome children, Micah and Annalise. It is a great joy to share our common passion for foster care and adoption as Kristy serves as an adoption professional in Ohio. We often trade adoption stories and could talk for hours about our shared vision.

I truly believe that each connection I have had the privilege of making along the way has been orchestrated by God. He has brought incredible people into my life. They have taught me and challenged me and allowed me to live out my passion. God has given me an incredible love for children and families touched by the issues of foster care and adoption, which continues today. I thank Him for directing my path beyond anything I could have imagined.

Jayne E. Schooler

Shortly after my wife, Eileen, and I adopted our son Christopher eighteen years ago, I said to our adoption counselor, “I hope some day I’ll have the opportunity to write about adoption. I have some thoughts.” Little could I imagine that the Lord would eventually call me to lead the National Council For Adoption (NCFa) and to coauthor this book. So I, too, like Jayne, humbly acknowledge and thank God for how He has directed my path to learn about and serve this wonderful mission of finding families for children through adoption.

Many thanks also to Jayne Schooler for inviting me to coauthor this edition of *The Whole Life Adoption Book*: It is an honor to help her build upon her previous fine work of advising and assisting adoptive parents in providing the best possible families for their children. I thank the board of directors of the National Council For Adoption whose confidence in me has enabled me to fulfill my fond desire to serve adoption and share those thoughts I sensed eighteen years ago. From the NCFa staff, Nicole Ficere Callahan and Chuck Johnson also have my deep respect and appreciation for their assistance with drafting and editing. Nicole’s expert research and writing and Chuck’s insightful editing were invaluable.

Finally, I cannot begin to thank enough my cherished partners in the promise and miracle of adoption, Eileen and Chris. They are the joys of my life. Our life together inspires my courage, passion, and whatever wisdom I may be blessed to share in this book.

Tom Atwood

INTRODUCTION

A RELATIONSHIP OF PROMISE

There are two kinds of relationships in life. One type of relationship is genetic, which we share with our relatives through birth: biological children, parents, brothers, sisters, grandparents, aunts, and uncles. No matter what happens, that genetic relationship remains. Nothing can erase the permanency of the biological connection.

The other kind is a union that begins with a promise. Marriage is such a union. Adoption is another. The adoption tie, established by a promise and recognized in law, provides loving parents and family for the child whose biological parents are not both willing and able to parent. Like marriage, adoption is a legal act. It is the legal transfer of parental rights and responsibilities from one parent or set of parents to another parent or set of parents.

Adoption is a miracle in much the same way as birth: Each one is unique and beautiful in its own way. We believe that God makes families through adoption, just as He makes families through procreation, and this is a cornerstone of what we teach in our own adoptive families. Talk to any adoptive parent, even one who does not have a religious perspective, and he or she will tell you, “This child belongs in our family.” People who were adopted will tell you, “My true family is the one I grew up in.” Birthparents will tell you, “Adoption was the most right and loving thing I could do for my child.” The adoptive family is the adopted child’s true and permanent family.

The adoptive family mirrors the biological family in almost every way. The power of the love between adoptive parent and adopted child is tremendous, and the challenges and differences of adoption can be overstated. However, while adoption is healthy and normal, there are times in the lives of many adoptive families and their children when any one of a number of adoption-related matters presented in this book may surface. Excited adoptive parents may enter this

relationship of promise with limited perception of or inadequate preparation for the unique challenges that can occur in adoption. Some of these issues may follow parents and children throughout life. When issues that normally occur within the framework of adoption arise unexpectedly, parents can experience a wide range of unsettling reactions: guilt, failure, inadequacy, fear, or helplessness. But with wisdom, understanding, patience, and love—and commitment to the promise—the family can handle the challenges. Without sensitive handling, these fragile concerns can become painful, possibly even threatening the foundation of the adoption promise.

Since the publication of the first edition of *The Whole Life Adoption Book* in 1993, the number of adoptive families in the United States, adopting both domestically and internationally, has grown immensely. For example, in 1993 there were approximately 38,000¹ children adopted from the foster care system. According to the most recent statistics available from the government accounting office (2005), that number rose to 51,323. In 1993, there were 7,377 intercountry adoptions, according to the government accounting office. That number has risen to over 19,000 intercountry adoptions a year.² A total of approximately 150,000 children are adopted every year.³ This figure includes domestic infant adoptions, domestic older child adoptions, relative and kinship adoptions, and intercountry adoptions.

The past fifteen years have been a time of incredible growth and understanding within our culture of the beauty of adoption. Adopted children and adoptive families find themselves embraced in a world of love and support, no longer feeling that the adoption must be a secret kept at all costs as it was by some, decades ago. Through research, observation, and experience, a deepening understanding of what adopted children and their families need has emerged within the adoption community, especially in regard to the effects of neglect and abuse that children may have experienced prior to being adopted and methods for dealing with those effects. In response to this deeper understanding, there have been a number of changes to the original book authored by Jayne Schooler.

The new edition includes an up-to-date look at the process of intercountry adoption, as well as insightful information on the lifelong journey of families touched by transcultural adoption. Dr. Timothy Callahan's contribution to this book, which addresses the issues of attachment and trauma from the most current and up-to-date research, will prove invaluable in helping parents and children. Adoption affects not only the parents but also the biological children in

the home. Elizabeth Tracy, who grew up as a birth child in a home with foster children, lends her life experience and academic research to a subject that has not been covered in this format in any earlier adoption literature.

The purpose of the revised edition of this book is fourfold:

1. To acquaint prospective and new adoptive parents with the options and issues surrounding the early steps of the adoption journey.
2. To provide awareness and knowledge to these parents regarding the needs of the children who enter their homes through adoption. Those needs include an understanding of the developmental stages of adoption, the impact of growing up in a transracial and/or trans-cultural family, the impact of trauma on the developing child, and the need many adopted children have to know their past.
3. To validate the concerns of adoptive families in the middle of the child-rearing years who find themselves wondering if what they are experiencing is normal and how best to solve unexpected pressures and problems.
4. To offer direction to parents facing the crucial transitional years of adolescence and young adulthood.

This book has been written not only from the perspective gained through working with many adoptive families but also from the hearts of two adoptive parents. We hope that our effort will encourage families to take the journey into adoption with excitement and anticipation, bolstered by the knowledge and understanding that will create a happy, nurturing family.

PART ONE



ADOPTION:
A LABOR OF
THE HEART



MAKING ROOM IN THE FAMILY

Unique Challenges Adoptive Parents Must Face

“Is she your real daughter?” they asked me. “Real?” I questioned.
“What do you mean by real? She is a child not born of my flesh,
that’s true. But she is a child truly born within my heart . . .
within my soul. Yes, she is real.”

— *an adoptive mother*

In the spring of 2006, five-year-old Jeffrey and his two-year-old sister, Janelle, joined their new family. The arrival of these beautiful children brought indescribable joy to Rob and Angie Cordova. Parents by birth of one-year-old Alise, they longed for a larger family. Now it was happening. A phone call changed their lives. They are adoptive parents.

Kimberly was a severely neglected, malnourished three-month-old when she was placed into the foster home of Bob and Debbie Jackson. For two and a half years the Jacksons’ desire to become Kimberly’s permanent family grew with each passing month. Their hope teetered back and forth from court decision to court decision. After waiting twelve months for the decision of an appeals court, the word finally came. It was over. Kimberly could now be adopted. She would stay with them forever. Bob and Debbie are adoptive parents.

Years of humiliating medical exams, endless questions, and emotional pain brought no hope to Catherine and Michael Johnston. “You have unexplained infertility,” doctors told them. “There is nothing else we can do for you medically.” They made a decision to pursue adoption. That was four years ago. Their son, Michael, born in Central America, steals the heart of everyone who meets him. Catherine and Michael are also adoptive parents.

These families, along with thousands across this country, all have in

common the choice they made to love, nurture, and embrace a child for a lifetime. It was a promise made to a genetically unrelated human being: “We want you to become one of us. We will be your family forever.”

The events that brought these families to this common decision, however, are as diverse as the families themselves. For many of these couples, dreams of a household filled with the noisy, delightful confusion of children lay crushed by the distressing reality of infertility. For them, adoption was the very last hope for ever having a family. For others, involvement in the temporary supervision of a child through a foster care program encouraged them to make a permanent home for the one they had grown to love. Still others, already biological parents, felt called to assume parenthood of an older, emotionally fragile child with a traumatic history of abuse, neglect, or abandonment.

In most ways, parenthood for adoptive couples is just like parenting a biological child; the required skills overlap. However, from the inception of the adoption relationship, adoptive parenting presents additional responsibilities that biological parents do not face. Without laying the proper groundwork in knowledge of these issues, parents who adopt can walk into their responsibilities without adequate understanding.

There are unique perspectives to be aware of in this relationship of promise. For example, families considering adoption must often prepare differently for this distinctive parent-child relationship, especially when the child has special needs or has suffered neglect or abuse. These preparations present challenges not faced within the usual biological parenting experience. Before the family takes the first step into the process, they must decide that the journey into the adoption experience is a viable option for them. And then throughout the adopted child’s life, adoptive parents need to be sensitive to her evolving interest in and understanding of adoption and help her with the questions that will naturally arise. Parenting is always a labor of the heart, and adoptive parenting is even more so because of these potentially tender issues.

MAKING THE DECISION TO ADOPT

Most couples or single parents ponder the decision to take the first step toward adopting a child for a long time. They know that the decision to adopt, just like the decision to have a biological child, is a decision that will alter the course of their life. The idea emerges first as a hope. It grows and gathers

energy, and finally a family is born.

Before families involve themselves in the adoption process, it is important that they engage in a thorough assessment of attitudes about themselves, their current situation, their current family life, and their support system. The following questions are written for prospective adoptive parents who are married couples since these are the most common adopters. It is understood that single adopters would need to address these questions as well.

1. What are the reasons we want to adopt?
2. How do we see adoption as a positive way to build our family?
3. In what ways do we have the kind of lifestyle that will be enhanced by the addition of a new family member?
4. How will our extended family respond to our adopted child?
5. Do we have personal problems that we think may improve if a child enters our family?
6. Is our motivation for adopting to “save a child”?
7. What is our perspective on the potential relationship: Do we want a child for ourselves, or are we a family for a child? In other words, what are our expectations for the child in this relationship?
8. Are we adopting to acquire a playmate for our biological child?
9. Can we love and nurture this child without knowledge of his or her history, no matter what may arise because of that history? Are we prepared for any special needs our child may have?
10. Adoption is a team effort involving parents, agencies, attorneys, and other individuals. How capable do we see ourselves of working through the system?
11. When we think of a child, do we envision a child who comes with a history or a child who comes with a blank slate?
12. If infertility is an issue, what point of resolution have we reached regarding our inability to conceive? How has infertility affected our marriage?
13. If singleness is the reason I don’t have children, what point of resolution have I reached regarding the possibility that I may never marry and have biological children with a spouse?
14. How has childlessness affected our relationships with relatives, friends, and their children?
15. Have we asked ourselves, “Who in our extended family or circle

of friends would best understand the unique needs of our adopted child?”

These questions may prove helpful in assessing a family’s readiness for the adoption experience. After potential adoptive parents explore their own outlook on adoption, the preparation can begin.

PREPARATION: CHARTING AN UNKNOWN COURSE

When Sam and Cynthia first contacted an agency because of their interest in adoption, they had no knowledge of how to prepare for the process. As they attended a training course, they became familiar with six sensitive areas that set apart readiness for adoption from readiness for parenting biological children. Their new understanding enhanced their own attitudes toward adoption and helped prepare them for the uncertainties ahead. What did they learn?

INFERTILITY: THE STEALER OF DREAMS

When most young adults approach marriage, they assume that at some point they will start a family. In their childhoods they likely filled hours of playtime rehearsing mother and father roles, projecting that someday in the future they would be just like Mom or Dad. They instinctively and naturally desire to parent.

For some, the assumption of this natural course of events disappointingly proves false. Infertility steals the dream. Forced to face the reality of their situation, couples find themselves coping with feelings and fears totally foreign to peers loaded down with babies and diaper bags. In a survey conducted several years ago but still relevant to the infertile couples of today, men and women provided emotionally penetrating responses to the following question: “There was once a time in your life when you wanted children but could not have them. What word or words describe your feelings at that time?”¹

Women, with a profound sense of hopelessness, responded that they felt “forlorn, unfulfilled, useless, absolutely heartsick, bitter, utterly desolate.” Men, projecting feelings similar to those of their wives, replied that they felt “disappointed, concerned for their wife’s reaction, frustrated and inadequate.”²

Catherine and Michael lived under the shadow of unexplained infertility through four years of painful tests and procedures that shed no light on their circumstance. Chained to a calendar and thermometer that dictated the timing of their physical relationship, they felt trapped in a pursuit that had no end. Those circumstances nearly destroyed the joy and beauty God intended for them to experience in this dimension of their marriage.

“I can take you back to the hospital room where I made a decision,” Michael commented. “As I stood beside Catherine while she endured the pain of her sixth artificial insemination procedure, I knew right then and there—this was the last time. Four years on the roller coaster, hoping from month to month for a positive word, were enough. No more attempts at anything. We would have to change directions. We would have to struggle now with being childless or deciding what steps to take next in relation to adoption.”

As the biological clock ticked away in the lives of Doug and Dorothy Hammon, their hope for a family diminished with each passing year. “I came from a family of seven children,” Dorothy said. “Doug came from a family of five children. We loved large families and planned to follow the same course. I couldn’t imagine anyone not being able to have a baby. It was beyond my belief that God would require that heartbreak of anyone.”

Involuntary childlessness produces what adoption expert David Kirk calls a role handicap. Couples moving toward adoption as a result of infertility enter parenthood from a different direction than they had expected. They have to alter their plans. Their disappointed hopes and dreams of having children may overwhelm them emotionally. Most couples who move on to adoption from this disappointment do so maturely and soundly, after grieving their loss. Some, however, turn to adoption in desperation, on the rebound, not fully prepared for the additional responsibilities of adoptive parenting.

Couples who view adoption as their last and desperate hope for a family face potentially major losses, especially in their expectations of themselves and what they perceive to be the expectations of others. These include “the loss of oneself or one’s partner as capable of conceiving a child, and the loss of the status of a biological parent and the presentation of a child to grandparents.” In addition, they face the loss of “the hoped-for birthchild to carry on the family line.”³

A primary challenge in preparing for the adoptive parent role is to mourn the loss of the dream. Couples should also realize that if they do not resolve this loss, it may quietly follow them all their lives, subtly affecting their responses to their children.

Prospective adoptive parents may perceive they have other challenges to deal with as well, and we'll explore all the issues mentioned below more deeply in later chapters.

NO MODEL TO FOLLOW

Forced to change course, couples find themselves facing still other challenges and role handicaps in preparing for adoptive parenthood. John and Marilyn Martin had finally decided that children would never be a part of their future unless they adopted. But they were troubled by the fact that they didn't know anyone who had taken this route. There was no one they could turn to for guidance. They needed answers for their questions but hesitated to keep calling the social worker, figuring that what was important to them would probably seem insignificant to her. So they didn't call.

Unlike biological parents, who are likely to have seen this type of parenting modeled in their own family of origin, "adoptive parents have little or no intimate contact with other adopters as adoptive parents."⁴ They might not even know an adopted child. David Kirk noted that this may present a second major challenge in the preparation process: *Adoptive parents may feel that they have no role models to steer them through the process.*

While this may have been the reality for adoptive parents in decades gone by, role models and mentors abound in our culture today. According to a national adoption survey, over two-thirds of the American population has been touched by adoption in some way. Many people have known someone who was adopted, know a family who has adopted, or are related to a person who was adopted.

OUR BUSINESS IS NOT OUR OWN

In addition to the emotionally charged motivation to have a family, complicated by the perceived lack of role models, couples entering the adoption journey lack a sense of privacy and control.

Biological parents are rarely subject to the personal scrutiny, decisions, and influences of others in the process of building a family. Adoptive parents have no choice. Each step of the way they must seek direction from professionals in the field. They must walk through a network of intrusive examinations by

outsiders, ranging from social workers to court officials. They feel that they must monitor what they say and how they say it out of fear that a trivial comment may disrupt the procedure.

These factors create a third concern during the preparation stage: *Adoptive parents soon begin to feel that their future is out of their control. Their hopes and dreams are in the hands of strangers.*

THE WAIT CAN BE SO LONG

A fourth difficulty for adoptive applicants is the time factor. When anticipating the arrival of their baby, pregnant couples have a pretty good idea (usually within a few days or weeks) of when to plan for the event. Adoptive parents must wait indefinitely just to get on an agency list for a homestudy. The homestudy is that process which enables agencies and families to assess if adoption is right for them. This is fully explained in chapter 2. Then they must wade through a maze of paperwork and interviews during this process. Finally, once the homestudy and training has been completed, the suspense really begins. Each ring of the phone may be the agency informing them of a child in need of a family.

When should couples tell their family and friends that they are adopting—when they first decide? Or during the homestudy? Or should they wait until they get the phone call? How can couples gather support around themselves when all they can answer to the when and who questions is “I don’t know”?

Therefore, the fourth frustrating challenge in making the transition into adoptive parenthood is that *these expectant adults have no sense of a reliable timetable. They have very limited knowledge of what to expect regarding when their new family member will join them.*

OTHER PEOPLE DON’T ALWAYS UNDERSTAND

“Why would you want to adopt?” “Why would you want to take on other people’s problems?” “Can’t you have any children of your own?” These are questions encountered by prospective adoptive parents every day. Questions like these can come from inside the family as well as from friends and acquaintances, and such comments can feel very invalidating to adoptive parents.

A fifth challenge for adoptive parents is *to understand that people in their life may not validate their role in their child's life to the extent they hoped they would.* "With my family and my husband's family, they view it as different from biological parenting. In fact, they were quite negative about it before we adopted," said one adoptive mother. "They actually said that the children would not really be 'their' grandchildren. However, as soon as our parents met our children, all those feelings were gone. I think they just didn't know how they would fit into the lives of these children who came to us at six and nine."

SHARED PARENTING FOR A SEASON

A sixth obstacle in preparing for adoptive parenthood crops up immediately after the child arrives: the question of parental rights over the newest child in the home. When are adoptive parents really the parents? On the day the child enters the home? Physically, yes. In many states, legally, no. The child may still remain in the legal custody of a birthparent, an agency, the public, or the court. A social worker and/or a court worker will regularly visit the home for a period of six months prior to finalization.

These visits can be a reminder of how parenting by adoption is different in those early months from parenting by birth. For the child's best interest, parental status is not fully granted in most states until that trial period expires and the court processes the finalization paperwork. And so a sixth and final test for adoptive parents as they enter their new role is that *they must cope with the lack of full entitlement as parents while functioning in the position as if they were.*

Preadoptive families who realize that they must prepare for their role differently than birthparents do will be more successful in managing the uncertainties that are a natural course of events. They will be better prepared for encountering adoption's four unique tasks, which will be introduced in this first chapter. The rest of this book will explore the adoptive family relationship in depth and give practical guidelines for dealing with the additional responsibilities.

It is most important that during the preadoptive stage parents begin to understand the unique tasks and realities of the relationship they are entering. It is equally important that mothers and fathers in the midst of parenting stand back and evaluate how they have approached the unique tasks of adoptive parenting.

TASK NUMBER ONE: HOW DO WE SEE OUR FAMILY?

Joe and Gayle Smith and Robert and Joyce Bennett had something in common. They had waited five years for that all-important phone call from the private adoption agency serving them. Within two months of each other, the calls finally came. For both couples, the waiting was over.

Three-week-old John joined the Smith family immediately. Within two years, Alicia, a month-old infant, completed the family circle. That was over twenty-one years ago. To this day, both children (now, of course, young adults) have no idea that they were adopted. Gayle and Joe decided that their family was “just like anyone else’s.” They decided to pretend the children were theirs by birth and to build the relationship from that perspective.

The Bennett family approached the adoption relationship very differently. Almost from the moment that two-week-old June captured the hearts of her waiting parents, the Bennetts communicated her special position in the family. Now an adult, June says of her parents’ conversation about adoption, “They told me that even from the time I was in the cradle, they would talk to me about adoption. They would say things like, “We wanted a baby so badly; we are so fortunate to have you.” They would always say how much they loved me. There was never a time that my parents had to sit me down and tell me I was adopted. I always knew it. It was just built in as part of our relationship.”

Note the dissimilarity between these two approaches. The Smiths chose to cover up the role of adoption in building their family, even to their children and themselves, as if it were something abnormal and unnatural. This plan might have helped them meet their need to lessen the sting of infertility and be just like everyone else. The strategy likely worked—for a while. The consequences of such a decision would not be felt for years to come.

The Bennetts, on the other hand, acknowledged adoption and its additional responsibilities and challenges and embraced its role in their daughter’s life. They had reconciled their struggle with infertility and arrived at a healthy understanding of their role as adoptive parents. They were able to say, “Yes, our daughter came to us in a different way from the usual; nevertheless, we are a family and she is where she belongs.” By talking to their child about adoption from an early age, in age-appropriate ways, the whole family understood adoption better and was comfortable with it.

Adoptive parents must learn the delicate balance between denying the difference in the nurturing process and acknowledging it by communicating to the child about his or her past. (This balance is more fully examined in chapter 10.) By keeping adoption a secret or, more commonly, by generally avoiding the topic of adoption and feeling uncomfortable with it, parents can subtly communicate to their children that there is something wrong with them and their family. Thankfully, almost no adoption professional today recommends keeping adoption a secret from the child, nor do many parents seek to do so.

TASK NUMBER TWO: HOW DO WE DEVELOP AN ENVIRONMENT THAT COMMUNICATES BELONGING?

Just like adopted children, when children are born into a family, they are “strangers” who seek to be accepted for who they are. However, because of their biological connection and the birth experience itself, it is easier for parents—physically, emotionally, and psychologically—to incorporate biological children into the family than it is children who join the family through adoption. The same needs for blending the family exist for adopted children, but a heavier assignment is added to the parents’ responsibilities.

Goal one of adoptive parenting is to accept, know, and honor each child for the unique characteristics, temperament, and genetic gifts he or she brings to the family. These, of course, come from the child’s birthfamily. Chuck Johnson, an adoptive father, mentioned that Christian, his eight-year-old son, is a naturally gifted athlete. “He is the first Johnson to hit a grand slam or score a three-pointer in basketball, and I am talking from a long line of non-sportsmen. I know this gift comes from his birthfather and I honor that.”

Goal two is to incorporate or integrate children into the family. Creating an environment in which children feel secure, loved, and that they belong provides them a foundation they can build on.

Parents then begin the third goal of adoptive parenting: developing secure, autonomous children. They must help their children differentiate from their family of origin and fully join and attach to the adoptive family. Newborns and toddlers are completely dependent upon their parents for survival, and trust and interdependence are developed during this stage. Thus for them, bonding occurs quite readily in the beginning, and differentiation occurs later as they develop

and mature. The first test starts as children move out into their neighborhood and then into preschool and beyond. Their ability to function well outside the home is determined largely by the quality of attachment and sense of belonging they experienced early on in their home. For children who have existing and ongoing relationships with birthparents, attachment and differentiation can be more complicated, but it is still almost always achievable.

The adoptive parents' role with their new child is like the biological parents': to integrate the new child into the family. But from the beginning of the adoptive relationship, parents should be communicating the reality of adoption to their child.

Tom and Eileen began speaking lovingly about his adoption to their son, Chris, when he was an infant, well before he could understand what it meant. But in so doing, he got used to the word, and Tom and Eileen became comfortable with talking about it. When Chris got older and his understanding increased, he felt natural and at ease about the role of adoption in his life. It was part of his identity, and he was comfortable with it because it was never hidden from him and did not suddenly appear in his life as a surprise. This honesty and openness in communication about adoption is crucial to bonding within the family and to the child's long-term psychological well-being. We'll talk more about it in chapters 7 and 11.

TASK NUMBER THREE: WHAT DO WE NEED TO KNOW ABOUT OUR CHILD, AND WHAT SHOULD WE DO WITH WHAT WE KNOW?

When an infant joins her new family, most agencies make sincere efforts to obtain social and medical history about the family of origin. Although this is often nonidentifying information, it gives parents something of a handle on anticipating future talents and strengths as well as behavioral, educational, or medical problems that might be related to genetics.

When an older child with a history of his own enters an adoptive family, parents are given information not only about the birthfamily but also about the social, medical, psychological, and educational history of their child. This material allows potential adoptive parents to make realistic decisions concerning the child. Some parents fail to realize that it is in everyone's best interest and is their

right as parents to gather as much information about their child as possible.

David and Jennifer Dotson were determined to adopt. As far as they were concerned, they could handle any problems a child might have. They believed that love would conquer all. They just wanted a child—any child.

When they went into the agency for an interview concerning a possible child for their family, they went in with blinders on. They asked no questions. They explored no possible problems. They failed to hold the agency accountable to give them all the information it had available. In fact, they declined to read some very important medical information about their child. In the following years, it proved almost impossible to retrace steps to get the information they had earlier avoided.

Biological parents question a doctor from the first moment of a child's life. But adoptive parents often hesitate to assert themselves when presented with a child in need of adoption. They feel inadequate. They don't know what to ask. They are not sure they are entitled to any information. They may be influenced by others to assume that they should simply be grateful for the opportunity and should avoid rocking the boat.

However, parents have a right to know about their child's genetic potential and history. It is the parents' job to be proactive in asking questions. The child, in turn, will someday need to have that information passed on to him or her. Chapter 11 will explore this task in fuller detail.

TASK NUMBER FOUR: HOW DO WE FEEL ABOUT OUR CHILD'S BIRTHFAMILY?

For years, statistics have told us of increasing cultural problems, such as alcohol or drug addiction and sexually transmitted diseases. The tragedy is that some children are born to unwed mothers who are trapped in such a lifestyle. Child abuse and the subsequent termination of parental rights among these parents are also increasing dramatically. Both situations plunge innocent youngsters into the adoption arena.

Parents who adopt confront a fourth task. They must face their feelings about their child's history, racial and cultural ties, and birthfamily. They must acknowledge the possibility of genetic liabilities, prenatal substance exposure, or problems caused by a lack of prenatal care. They must reconcile their attitudes

toward these realities in light of their own value structure. Finally, they must recognize that such a negative beginning can have far-reaching consequences for the child (through behavior and/or disabilities) and for themselves (in their parenting workload and ultimate ability to accept the child fully). Adoptive parents must decide how, when, and how much of the truth of those circumstances they will communicate to the child, knowing that an adopted child's self-esteem can be affected by his or her perceptions of genetic origins.

Adoption is truly a labor of the heart—and head! It begins with a time of difficult preparation. It is filtered through months, even years, of process. By its very nature, adoption carries with it evolving responsibilities that if approached with love, sensitivity, wisdom, and hope can lead to a healthy adoptive relationship for a lifetime.

SUMMARY

Adoptive parents enter adoption with six major challenges unique to preparing for the adoptive parenting experience:

1. They may have to mourn the loss of their dream: their ability to conceive children, their status as biological parents, and their biological child.
2. They may feel they have no role models to guide them through the process.
3. They must realize that their hope for a family will be dictated by the input of strangers.
4. Preadoptive parents have no clear timetable by which to plan their future.
5. Adoptive parents must filter through the comments and opinions of others and manage experiences of invalidation.
6. Permanent parental rights are generally not granted until at least six months into the relationship. Adoptive parents must manage shared parenting authority for a season.

Parents will journey through a lifetime of tasks that are unique to the adoptive family relationship. Adoptive parents' journeys involve four tasks, answering these questions:

1. How do we see family? Do we deny the fact of our child's adoption, or do we acknowledge adoption as a healthy act and the process by which our child joined our family? How do we think others see us?
2. How do we develop an environment that communicates belonging? When and how do we begin to communicate with our child about adoption?
3. What do we need to know about our child, and what should we do with what we know? How can we get important facts about our child's past? When should we communicate those facts?
4. How do we feel about our child's birthfamily? How do we reconcile our child's beginnings with our own value system, and how do we relate this to our child in positive ways?

QUESTIONS FOR SMALL GROUPS

1. What particular challenges have you had in preparing to become an adoptive family?
2. If infertility has been an issue, what problems has it created in you, in your marriage, and in your relationships with couples who have children?
3. How have you handled infertility or singleness in relation to your hopes and your personal faith? In what ways have you worked through bitterness, anger at God, feelings of inadequacy, and so forth?
4. What messages are you receiving from extended family members and friends about your desire to adopt? How do those messages make you feel?
5. What are your needs and expectations of yourself, of your spouse, and of the agency with which you are working?