

# **Becoming a “Public Family”**

## **Preparing for Trans racial/Cultural Adoption**

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### **What is a public family?**

When families adopt a child from a different race or culture it is usually obvious to strangers that their child joined their family through adoption. This makes the family a little different than “the norm” and the target for questions about adoption. While most people have positive feelings about adoption, the questions they ask can be unwelcome and challenge the parent’s patience. The way parents respond to these questions will have an impact on their child’s sense of self and model how the child should respond to similar questions.

### **How should I respond to questions about adoption?**

There are several considerations when responding to questions about your family. Of course, the most important is respecting your child.

#### **1. Use Positive Adoption Language**

Many of the people who ask questions do not realize the language they use to talk about adoption can be hurtful for those touched by adoption. Use the appropriate language in your response to help educate others and respect your child, the child’s birth family and yourself.

*Question:* Aren’t you afraid his natural parents will want him back?

*Response:* His birth parents made an adoption plan for him and our adoption is legally complete.

#### **2. Educate Others**

Many of the people who ask questions may be interested in adopting themselves and it is wonderful to help them if you have the time and energy. It behooves a parent to spend time educating people who will be in contact with their child and family.

*Question:* How much did she cost?

*Response:* Children don’t cost any money, but I did pay fees for the legal processes necessary to complete an adoption.

#### **3. Redirect the Conversation**

Your child may not appreciate being in the spotlight all the time. Turn the conversation around so you are not talking about your child, but talking about the person asking the questions. Using humor can be a useful way to redirect a conversation, but be careful that the joke isn’t at the expense of the child.

*Question:* Where did you get such a cute little boy? What happened to his real parents? Can you imagine anyone giving up such a little darling?

*Answer:* Boy, you ask a lot of questions.

#### **4. Just Say No**

It's okay to tell someone the questions they are asking are too personal. Parents should never share their child's history. It's the child's story to share. Adoption fees should not be discussed in front of children. When you set limits with others it helps your child learn they can keep some things private.

#### **5. Angry Responses**

If a parent gets angry every time a person asks a question about adoption, the child is going to think they are the cause of their parent's anger.

**6. You can get some help in teaching your child how to handle** comments and questions about adoption in the WISE Up program. You and your child can learn about your choices and develop strategies such as: **Walk away**; say **it's private**; **Share** something about your personal story; **Educate** about adoption. Join us at IAC Center for a WISE Up workshop. You and your children can learn these skills.

#### **Why do I need to teach my child about their birth culture?**

Adults who joined their families through adoption have told us that they wish their parents had helped them learn more about their birth culture. Their race and birth culture are an important piece of their identity.

#### **How do I teach my child?**

- **Surround your children with symbols and artifacts of their birth culture. Decorate your home to promote cultural awareness.** This can be as simple or as intricate as you would like to make it. It can include artwork, pottery, collectible dolls, cultural trinkets, jewelry, clothing, fabrics, it is limited only by your imagination!
- **Reflect your child back to him/herself.** Buy books and pictures depicting multicultural children in ordinary life activities. Books can be used both to represent the reality of multicultural lives and to address issues of adoption, identity, culture, and race.
- **Incorporate cultural practices and rituals into your own family life.** i.e. go to ethnic restaurants, cook ethnic foods, explore traditional and current ethnic music, use your child's birth name, learn and use some affectionate words and expressions of your child's culture, collect and wear ethnic clothing, etc.
- **Celebrate the holidays and occasions of your child's culture.** It is important that you make these celebrations a part of your family life but not to the detriment of your family's culture. Create a hybrid culture that recognizes the cultures of all family members. This will help your children incorporate all of the cultures into their identities.

- **Seek out diversity in choice of neighborhood, schools, churches, cultural organizations, music, and reading material.**
- **Look for opportunities to expand the racial and cultural mix of your own group of friends.**
- **Seek opportunities for your child to be in the majority** – ethnic churches, language classes, culture camps, a visit to an ethnic neighborhood.
- **Seek out solid connections with racial and cultural role models and mentors.** Ask for help! It is important that your child have people in their life who are the same race as they are. Reach out to people in your child's ethnic group for help.

### **What if my child isn't interested?**

At different developmental stages, children's interest in their birth culture may diminish. It is important to continue to offer opportunities even when the child is not interested. This gives the child the message that you value their birth culture and you are ready to help them when they are ready to learn more.