



pact's

point of view

The newsletter for adoptive families with children of color

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# Ask Pact

## How to Deal with Teasing About Adoption

by Susan Ito

**Q:** *I adopted my daughter, now eight years old, from Guatemala. Recently I dropped her off at the birthday party of a classmate. When I picked up, she was unusually quiet and moody. After some prodding from me, she finally revealed that one of the other girls had teased her for being adopted. I was really shaken—nothing like this has ever happened before. I told her that being adopted means that she is very, very loved, and I gave her a big hug. She seemed to cheer up, but afterwards I worried that maybe there's more I should say or do. How can I help my daughter if something like this happens again?*

**A:** Thank you for your question. On the surface this may seem like a simple experience requiring a simple and reassuring response like the one you gave, but I believe there are many layers to explore here. As an adopted person, reading about this incident reminds me of too many times when I was teased or questioned as a child. I remember feeling that an underlying negative message about adoption and me was being communicated.

It is sad but true that the words "you're adopted" are more often than not meant to injure, rather than compliment. Often the statement "you're adopted" in a derogatory voice is code for "you were unwanted" or "you were given away" or "you don't really belong."

I think it would be helpful to begin by asking your daughter questions to find out what the teasing was about for her. What did the other girls say? What did your daughter understand was the meaning behind it?

The fact is that your daughter was adopted; that is a fact, neither good nor bad. It's when that word becomes loaded, and used as a weapon or a slur, that it's important to look at what it is supposed to mean,

and even more importantly, what she took from it. It is important to understand what messages your child internalizes when she takes in "adopted" as a form of insult.

When I think back to my own experiences as a child, I wish now that I would have thought to say, "It's true, I am adopted," and looked the person back in the eye as if to ask, "What of it?"

As for your response: I know that you were trying to comfort and reassure her by telling her that being adopted means that she is "very, very loved" but that is just one part of the adoption experience. It is important for adoptees that the challenges of the experience are validated by those who love us. Does it really make sense to say that our birth parents "loved us so much that they gave us away"? This is a refrain that adoptees often hear, and believe me, it can be perplexing to think about.

Or did you mean that she is loved by you, her adoptive parent? This is a wonderful sentiment but given the situation, is almost beside the point. She is being teased or called out because she was placed for adoption, something that you reaped the "benefits" of but did

not, probably, make happen. Adopted children, like any children who have suffered loss, often respond not only with sadness but a sense of shame. They wonder: was it my fault? was I not lovable enough? why was I placed for adoption? As a parent, you can help your daughter tremendously by understanding this dynamic.

Asking her to focus on “love” during a time like this could backfire. It could give the message that her feelings of pain are unacceptable or difficult for you to endure. It could give her the feeling that it is not comfortable for you to hear about conflicting feelings that she has about adoption. Adoption may feel like it is “all about love” for some adoptive parents, but it is interwoven with deep loss for adoptees and for birth families.

To become a member of your family she had to first lose the connection to her first family. As painful as it might feel, it is important that the losses that are inherent in any adoption be acknowledged and grieved. It might help to say that you love her very much and are sorry that she was teased and insulted.

I wouldn't wait for this to happen again. I would bring it up, in a quiet moment, and say, “Remember when those girls teased you about being adopted? What do you think they meant by that?” Hopefully it will open the door to a deeper conversation, one of many that will happen over your daughter's lifetime.

*Susan Ito is an adoptee, writer, teacher, and Pact Family Camp Coordinator. She co-edited the anthology *A Ghost At Heart's Edge: Stories & Poems of Adoption*.*