



pact's

point of view

The newsletter for adoptive families with children of color

First published in Pact's Point of View © 2009
Do not reprint without permission.

Director's Corner

Naming NATE

by Beth Hall

I get asked all the time about how to talk with children about adoption. Several years ago, Gail Steinberg (Pact co-founder) and I created some children's stories that we thought could give parents some models of how to interact with children to promote deeper conversations about topics related to adoption. I hope the story will be a useful example of how children think and talk about adoption and race. Enjoy!

Baby best-loved, Baby Nate, has Mamas and Papas, two of each.
He was born, then adopted—still fuzzy as a peach.
All of his parents gave him their best,
And hoped never, not ever, would he feel he was less.

His first Mama and first Papa gave him his life and birth-day,
But they had hard troubles and couldn't take care of him all the way.
They wondered and worried what they should do,
Worried and wondered but neither one knew.

Mama Two and Papa Two yearned for a child to hold,
But they had hard troubles and couldn't create a baby so bold.
They wondered and worried what they could do,
Worried and wondered but neither one knew.

When the Mamas and Papas heard about each other,
They saw they could be kind to each other's dream.
So they figured out a plan to work together,
Thinking of the baby and becoming a team.

Each of them would have a part,
A different job, played from the heart.
First Mama and Papa would always care,
And Mama and Papa Two would always be there.
Together they would give him his name,
The word he would know himself by, the place from where he came.

Naming a child is a serious matter, it lasts forever.
They each had ideas but would they be able to agree, ever?
How would they decide?
To choose a name, they needed a guide.

Let's name him for someone important said Mama One.
How about Martin Luther or Tom Edison?
These are important names, for an important boy.
A name to say how much he matters—he isn't just a toy.

Mama Two said in my clan,
Each is named for one who's passed, to build connecting ties.

My father's name was Adam, like the first man.
To name the baby Adam would be most wise.

Yes, names have meaning, said Papa One.
Nathan means gift—a present, a son!
Let's name him Nathan, what could be better?
Nathan! Yeah, Nathan! Yes, Nathan's the one.

Too ordinary, too usual, said Papa Two.
Let's name him something strong and cool.
How 'bout Amani? Tanzania? Raoul?
Make him feel special when he's a kid in school.

So many good ideas, just one little boy.
Put all the names together and see what we get:
How about Nathan Adam Amani Tanzania Edison?
Is that the best name yet?

That name is a little long.
It's too long, too hard, it just seems wrong.
But what about Nate?
N for Nathan
A for Adam
T for Tanzania
And E for Edison

We can call him Nate,
All our good ideas combined as one.
Yes, let's call him Nate,
Best loved son!

Mamas and Papas, One and Two,
Carry him, cherish him, the whole way through.
Given in love, joy-filled, and proud,
His name is sweet: shout it loud.

Working together they made him a name,
Built on their love, the moment he came.
Working together they had great joy,
Your name is Nate, our best loved boy!

Naming Nate has deeply personal roots for me. When my daughter was born, on her first birth certificate was written Baby Girl Arroyo and on her second Sophia Anne. Anne because it was my middle name and her birth mother's first—somehow completing the circle of two mothers that were both hers. Ana said she wanted us to choose the name because this baby was going to “be ours.” I knew it was a lie but I was so enticed with ownership of this child that I could not resist her argument. Somehow Ted knew that our first daughter would be Sophia. It was so brilliant. A name that is beautiful in either Spanish or English...of course we put our anglicizing mark on it by spelling it according to our own English-speaking privilege.

As Sophia grew older, she relished recounting our misguided planning and we all laughed as she explained our lack of knowledge of the Spanish spelling, Sofia, meaning wisdom. Our choice seemed to be in direct opposition to our words when we said we wanted her to identify as a Latina rather than as an Anglo like ourselves. By age six she felt entitled to spell it both ways and loved to correct adults by changing it at frequent opportunities.

One night, Sofia said: “We talked about names in school today. I don't think my birthmother really loved me. She didn't give me a name. I wanted her to give me a name.”

“I can't imagine how hard it must have been for you to realize that right in the midst of your class,” I said.

Her seven-year-old body crumpled into tears that lasted an eternal eight minutes. I forced myself not to fix, not to interpret—the grief of the baby, the child I loved more than life itself—pain and deep truth commingled in the one small body in my lap. Words would only have denied the reality of her pain.

Later we suggested that she consider taking back her birth family name. Sofia was thrilled to add Arroyo to her already long name during the process of changing her spelling to Sofia with an f and Ana with an a—especially in the face of having no other from her first mother.

With all children placed for adoption there is a period of time where there is ambiguity about the child's legal status. If the birth parent(s) has chosen the adoptive parent(s) prior to the birth, it can be an awkward period, since both are intimately involved with the decisions being made on behalf of the child, but only the birth parent has the legal right to make such decisions. Presuming the adoption goes forward, the adoptive parents will be the ones making all future decisions for the child.

But the person who matters most in all of this is the child, and ultimately both sets of parents are and will be important to each child. Generosity and understanding on both sides can go a long way toward smoothing over the inevitable differences in ideas and expectations about the decisions one makes for this shared baby in the first few days – and really for the rest of his or her life.

Naming is a way of claiming our children, making them ours. In adoption this can feel particularly important because adoptive parents are already getting messages that they may be the second-best parents to their second-best child. Naming is an important ritual, a way of bringing the child into the fold. I have come to believe adoptive parent have every right to name their child...and that birth parents do, too. Sofia may have demonstrated best how important it can be to an adopted child to know that both their parents loved and claimed them. As the second (or third or fourth...) parents in our children's lives, adoptive parents have the opportunity to consider how to address the issue of children who have been given previous names — which of course is really just a metaphor for all adopted children's reality of being part of at least two families.

As adoptive parents, none of us want our children to feel disconnected or ashamed of that part of themselves that they associate with their birth heritage. Anything we can do to counterbalance the message to the child that she must become a new member of her adoptive family by leaving behind the person she was at birth is really important to helping children become confident adults who feel free to be their full selves. So I have come to see a collaboration between birth and adoptive parents as a beautiful way to begin the process of loving adopted children in their completeness and bringing all of who they are to their new family. Creating a name that incorporates both identities says to a child, “I accept you for who you were before you came to me and who you will become as I watch you grow.”

Children can have many middle names. If it is important for the adopting or birthing parent to give their child a first name of their own choosing, there is still room for joining many names together. This is a golden opportunity to give the adopted child a lifelong message of acceptance and self-love that places their wholeness and well-being above all else. The gift you get back for yourself is the pure joy that is found when you realize you truly must be a parent because you are thinking first of your child, rather than solely your own comfort or desires. Naming Nate is a way of helping children understand the way they are loved, seen and named by all of their parents.