

Ask a First Mother

by Susan Dusza Guerra Leksander

Who Are Adopted Childrens' Forever Parents?



Ask A First/Birth Mother provides a forum for adoptive parents to ask the things they fear to ask, so that they can more competently address the complexities of adoption for the benefit of the children they are parenting. If you have a question you would like to see addressed, please send it to the attention of Ask A First/Birth Mother at info@pactadopt.org.

Pact's Point of View is excited to introduce a new column by Susan Dusza Guerra Leksander. Susan is a licensed psychotherapist in the Bay Area and has done clinical work with birthparents, former foster youth, and adult adoptees in agency and private practice settings. She has spoken on the first/birthparent experience at Pact Camp and educational workshops and is inspired to continue her dialogue with adoptive parents throughout the year. She has a ten-year-old daughter whom she placed for an "open" adoption, which was subsequently closed by her daughter's adoptive parents. She is also a transracial adult adoptee who reunited with her first/birthparents as a teenager.

Q:

Do the terms "forever mother" or "forever parent" denigrate first/birth parents as if they are somehow not forever?

A:

Thank you for asking this question. The language we use around adoption-related issues has power. That power can be used to honor all parties or it can be used to create a sense of "othering," distancing, and dehumanizing around the sacred and complex nature of the diverse relationships we have with each other.

As a first/birthmother I do find the terms "forever mother" or "forever parent" to be offensive and devaluing of my connection with my daughter. I will forever be the woman who conceived, nurtured, protected and mothered her for her first nine months of life. Her first/birthfather will forever be the man who conceived, nurtured, protected and fathered her for her first nine months of life.

We parented in ways that are perhaps not as recognized, and there are certainly differences between parenting while pregnant and parenting once a child is born. However, we will forever be her mother and father and she will forever be our daughter. She also has another mother and father, they will forever be her mother and father and she will forever be their daughter as well. These bonds exist across space and time and cannot be created or dissolved by legal documents. Using the term "forever family" around children may lead them to think that you do not value their first/birthparents or their presence in your lives. This could lead to confusion, guilt and secrecy for your child when they continue to feel the unbreakable bond to their first/birthparents, whether or not the adoption is

open or closed, or whether they will be able to reunite if they choose.

I also wanted to address this question as an adult adoptee with four parents. My birth/firstparents were always my parents, even though I didn't meet them until I was a teenager. My birthfather was and will forever be my father, though he didn't know that I existed until I was six months old, the adoption finalized without his knowledge or consent (my birthmother was young and ashamed and hid his identity for several reasons). My birthmother was and will forever be my mother, even though she "tried not to love me" when she was pregnant so it would hurt less when she said goodbye. She, of course, was not successful at this and loved me anyway. They will forever be my parents, my ancestors, my blood, my biggest fans. Just as my adoptive parents will always be my parents, my mom and dad, my supporters, my stability, my security, my home, my biggest fans.

I want to delve deeper into this issue of language. As I was preparing this column, I did some research into writings by activist first/birthmothers, some of whom prefer to be called natural mothers, exiled mothers, or simply mothers. Several things struck me.

First, I was reminded that, for some who do not parent their child, adoption was NOT a choice. I read stories of disempowered women who were coerced, pressured, shamed into giving up their child and of birthfathers who were not informed that they even had a child. Adoptive parents and adoption professionals may like to think this is a thing of the past. However, I have worked as

a therapist with young women whose children were removed at birth in 2007 and 2008, without their consent. One of these women was severely mentally ill and in jail at the time. The other had been incorrectly labeled a "sex offender" for very complicated reasons and was legally prohibited from contact with any children. Including her own.

Second, in reading what other first/birthparents have written, I was struck by the importance of acknowledging the diversity of voices and experiences. I have tended to use "birthparent" in talking about myself as well as my biological parents. However, I realize that for some who did not raise their child, that term does not feel encompassing of their experience. I took pause when reading the words of an activist who writes passionately about the term "birthparent" as being created by the adoption industry to replace the term "natural mother" or "natural father" to relegate us to the role of "breeders," to imply that our only role was to deliver a child, and to prevent adoptive parents from feeling offended by the implication that they were "unnatural" parents. I feel committed to sharing not only my personal perspective, but giving voice to other marginalized birthparent experiences as well. For now, I will be calling this column Ask a First/Birth Mother to acknowledge that diversity.

To learn more about the first/birthparent perspective, I encourage you to visit www.firstmotherforum.com and www.exiledmothers.com.

May this be in service to our own growth and the well-being of all our children.