pact's point of view
The newsletter for adoptive families with children of color

First published in Pact's Point of View © 2013
Do not reprint without permission.

What Is Important in Adoption

Interview with Adam Pertman

Adam Pertman's book Adoption Nation is an ideal text for those looking for an overview of the history of adoption in the United States, the different kinds of adoption available today, and some of the challenges that face the adoption triad, including adopted people and adoptive families. Having just revised and updated Adoption Nation (a new edition was released in April 2011), Pertman agreed to look back over the decade since the book was first published and reflect with Pact on how the "adoption nation" has changed, for better and for worse.

Pact: What are the most important changes that you have seen in adoption in the last ten years in foster adoption? International adoption? Domestic infant adoption?

Pertman: The changes in adoption from foster care in our country have been extensive and profound. For starters, far more attention and resources have been focused on them – and the results show what we can do, as a nation, when we decide that children are truly important and not just the stuff of easy rhetoric. (You know, every politician alive at some point has said something like "children are our future," and then they cut programs for them pretty quickly when budgets get tight.) With initiatives at the state and federal level, the number of boys and girls adopted from foster care has risen steadily over the past decade, to an unprecedented 58,000 last year. And a growing number of those boys and girls are ones who had less of a shot in the past because they had special needs, were people of color, or were older.

I'm very worried that this progress is now endangered by budget cuts, and concerned that some of these new families are struggling because they're not getting the assistance and education they need, but the increase in numbers is mighty impressive and it means that far more children are now living in enduring, nurturing families. That's a very good thing. My glasses are not rose-colored, however, so I know we've got lots more work to do, both for the children who haven't yet found permanency and for the growing number of families who are multiracial and multiethnic (notably including those dealing with significant special needs) -- and who are not receiving sufficient instruction, services and support. Still, the increases are significant, they represent genuine progress, and they offer hope for the future.

Alas, I cannot say the same for adoptions from other countries. The big change in this realm is that the numbers are now plummeting. There are lots of reasons, which I discuss in my book, but the bottom line is not a good one. Whatever people think of intercountry adoption, I hope no one believes that any child is better off institutionalized (i.e., in an orphanage) than in a family. Of course, no parent should be coerced into giving up a child by corrupt practitioners, so I understand why some countries have suspended or ended adoptions while they implement reforms; but I also think we need to move expeditiously to get things right so that children who genuinely need new homes can get them. It's great that a growing number of nations are trying to develop domestic adoption cultures, and that the Hague Convention – an international treaty that I also deal with in Adoption Nation – is being implemented to impose better rules and regulations. But while all these changes are being sorted out, too many boys and girls are being left to languish. Other recent aspects of intercountry adoption that I try to shed light on, and analyze, are disconcerting events like the mother who "returned" her son to Russia (no, adoption is not child rental) and the earthquake in Haiti, which had lots of lessons to teach us about when it's appropriate to move children after a natural disaster and, most important, when it's not.

In domestic infant adoption, I think the most significant changes have been less dramatic but also very important. The numbers have stayed roughly the same, an estimated 15,000 per year, but a growing number of the adoptive parents involved are single, gay or lesbian, and the movement toward open adoption remains steady, so there are more and more "extended families" that include biological relatives. A related development, which is huge by any measure, is the effect of the internet on adoption –particularly in the realm of domestic infant adoption because, at least for now, that's where most searches for and reunions of birth/adoptive relatives are taking place. And social media like Facebook are accelerating that trend to lightning speed. I think a comparable phenomenon relating to international adoption, and to some extent adoption from foster care, isn't far behind.

Pact: What do we need to change in adoption? Why?

Pertman: I alluded earlier to the biggest thing I believe needs to change: professionals, policymakers and everyone else needs to embrace the reality – without attaching stigma, shame or negative attitudes – that adoption cannot remain primarily a process by which we place children into new families, but has to evolve into a process by which we also enable those families to succeed. That's because a growing number of adoptions are of children from foster care or orphanages – that is, children who were abused, neglected, or institutionalized – so it stands to reason that some minority of their families need help. This is the subject of the latest research report from the Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute, and I strongly urge people to read it.

Among the other changes I think we need to work for – big and small – are better recruitment of and services/supports for adoptive parents of color; education/training for pre-adoptive and adoptive parents about the issues they may face with their children, from ones relating to race and racism to developing positive adoptive identity; assistance to struggling parents in our own country and others so that biological families can remain intact whenever possible; services and support, such as mentoring but also many others, for adopted children and those in foster care; increased counseling and services for pregnant women so they can make better-informed decisions, whatever they may be; and on and on. It will take a book to go through them, so I think I'll write one. Oh, yeah, I guess I did.

Pact: Can you comment on a couple of stories that had made the news about adoption and how you think we should interpret them?

Pertman: Here are two: I think the case of the Tennessee woman who put her son on a plane to Russia taught too many people the wrong lessons. It reinforced an unfortunately too-common attitude that adoption entails "shopping" for a child, by suggesting that "returning defective goods" is a tenable option. No, adoption is not child rental: adoptive parents have the same unconditional, permanent responsibility to care for their children as any other parents. Yes, sometimes adoption involves challenging children. The questions that should have arisen and been addressed from this unnerving episode include (but are not limited to): are orphanages providing sufficient, accurate background about children to enable professionals and parents to do all they can once they get new homes? Are agencies and other professionals providing adequate information and training to parents who adopt challenging children, and are they being sufficiently responsive when struggling parents reach out to them? And, perhaps most important, have we developed and provided the adoption-competent mental health professionals and relevant services to help families succeed? I'm afraid the answer to all of those questions is "no."

The second: celebrity adoptions, particularly when they're transracial like the recent one by Sandra Bullock, send mixed signals – or at least people interpret them in ambivalent ways. Overall, my two cents is that we shouldn't be judging how anyone decides to form their families, as long as they do so in an educated and ethical way. I can't stand when people view these kids as "trophies" or anything of that sort, and I think those perceptions can be stigmatizing and create negative attitudes more broadly. But I also think celebrities help to "normalize" adoptions because, in our culture, we think if they do it we can, too, so it's okay. Most of all, I just hope the stars who become parents through this route, especially those who raise children who aren't the same race, ethnicity or even nationality as their own, educate themselves about the realities they and their sons and daughters will face – and deal openly, honestly, sensitively and straightforwardly with them.

Pact: Your children are no longer young—what has changed in your own understanding as an adoptive parent?

Pertman: This really is a question for another book, though I certainly tell lots of my story in Adoption Nation. Overall, I'd say it's much easier to teach than to do – that is, I know a good bit about adoption, its developmental stages and so forth, and people ask me for advice regularly. But I've become acutely sensitive to the fact that it's hard to factor in all we know at the moment when a child is acting up or asking a tough question. So I try hard to incorporate that understanding in my work and, in my parenting, I increasingly try not to deal with the most-vexing situations precipitously, when passions are highest and judgment usually isn't as reasoned. This goes for adoption and non-adoption issues. Our son is now seventeen and our daughter is fourteen, so we've got two teenagers. Yes, you can feel sorry for us, send us advice and emotional armor, and pray that we can make it through the next few years! Seriously, this parenting journey is not always a smooth one, but I wouldn't trade my kids for anything on the planet and I am grateful with all my heart that I am lucky enough to have them in my life, adoption issues and all.

Adam Pertman is Executive Director of the Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute (adoptioninstitute.org) and is recognized as one of the country's leading experts on adoption. A former Pulitzer-nominated journalist, he is Associate Editor of the scholarly journal Adoption Quarterly.

Adoption Nation: How the Adoption Revolution is Transforming Our Families—and America is available for purchase from Pact.