

Helping Children Understand that Adoption Means Having Two Family Legacies

by Francie Portnoy

One of the major developmental tasks for any child is the forming of his or her self-definition. Much of this task is done on a subconscious level and over a great deal of time. The personal self-definition a child develops will be greatly affected by her family legacy: a legacy that includes all of the traits she acquired through heredity (all her genetic traits) as well as what she sees, hears, feels, or is told about herself and her family as she grows up. In addition, the ways significant others react to her, what they praise in her as well as what they attempt to diminish, will have a great impact on how she sees herself. All this is part of a family of legacy that provides a measuring stick with which the child will compare and contrast herself; a mirror by which she can reflect her self-image and which provides the groundwork for her self-definition.

This integration of the family legacy is an enormous job for any child, but for the adopted child there is an additional component to this task. The adopted child has to integrate two family legacies into her self-definition. The adopted child has two families who have helped form and define her — her birth family and her adoptive family (in the case of older-child adoptions there are often more than two families involved, thus even more legacies to integrate). Both the birth family and the adoptive family contribute influences that will be felt throughout her lifetime. Both will always be an integral part of her. And both are important components in her self-definition.

It is only recently that we have begun to understand the impact of genetics on individual development. While we have acknowledged for some time the importance of genes in connection to physical characteristics and certain medical conditions, it wasn't until the late 1970s, when Thomas Bouchard of the University of Minnesota began studying twins reared apart since birth, that we began to understand fully the influence of genetics on personality, abilities and even social preferences. Scientists now believe that both genetics and environment play important roles in making us the

people we are. In fact, over the years that Bouchard has been investigating nature and nurture, he has come to the conclusion that, over time, the influence of heredity is tempered and modified by the influence of the environment. So, statistically speaking, about half of a person's personality can be attributed to genetics and half to environment.

The genetic influences, though, are often missing in the family legacy mirror given to the adopted child. Although the child can readily see where she gets her family name, the family tradition of Sunday outings, her value system and her religious affiliation, she usually cannot see where she gets her nose, her hair color, or her long, slender fingers. Nor can she connect her aptitude for sports, instead of music, to any genetic programming.

A child from a traditional adoption often has little information about her birth family. (It is not unusual for children adopted internationally to have much less information about their birth families than do traditional domestic adoptees.) This lack of information can mean a void of about 50% of an adopted child's self-reflection. This absence complicates the task of the integration of a family legacy into the self-definition, since it is very difficult to integrate that which you do not know. A child adopted at an older age will have both a genetic and a personal history from his birth and/or foster families which he must integrate with the legacies of the adoptive families to form his self-definition. This fact considerably increases the difficulty of the task for such children.

When your child has a difficult task to accomplish, so do you. From the time your child begins to walk, from her first words, from learning about the dangers of "hot," to the days of struggling with the science project or learning to drive, you are there to help her along. Helping your child integrate her family legacies into a strong, healthy self-definition is no different. And because adoption complicates the task of integration for your child, it will also complicate the task for you.

In order for you to begin to help your child with this process of integration, you will need to understand that because your child has two family legacies, she comes to you “pre-programmed” with the genetic heritage of another family. She is programmed by another set of genes that will greatly affect not only her physical appearance and health, but her temperament, preferences, strengths, weaknesses and learning abilities. She may even come to you with a completely different racial and/or ethnic heritage. Your job, as an adoptive parent, is to help your child acknowledge and honor the legacies from both her birth and adoptive families, to accept and integrate all of who she is into a complete and healthy self-definition. Some ways to help your child with this process include the following:

- Help your child understand that adoption means having two family legacies. Introduce the concept of the birth family early and positively. When reading or talking about your child’s adoption, start with her true beginning: when she was born into the birth family, not just when she entered your family. Choose adoption books that mention birth parents. This too will help connect her to real people (a concept some adoptees have problems with). In order to do this, you have to be comfortable with the reality of your child’s birth family.
- Explore your feelings about the reality of two family legacies. Understand that her feelings will usually change over time depending on her developmental stage or other events that are going on in her life. At times, she may feel that having another family’s genetic history is a wonderful, interesting thing; at some other times, it may be a bit threatening to be “different.” Either way, reassure her that her feelings are normal and OK and that you can accept them. Explain that everyone is “different” in his or her own way.
- Encourage her to explore her fantasies about her birth family. Every adopted child has birth family fantasies. These, too, like her feelings about two family legacies, change with time and emotions. Some children are more aware of their fantasies than others. This awareness depends on the type of personality the child has (the more introspective child may be more aware of her fantasies). Talking with your child about her fantasies will give you an opportunity to correct any misconceptions she may have, offering her some of the information you may have about her birth history. It also may give you some insight about your child’s emotional state at that particular moment, since her feelings about her birth family often affect and reflect self-definition.
- Help her learn as much as possible about her birth family. If little or no information is available, help her learn about the potential genetic contributions that came from her birth family. Talk about physical

characteristics first; as your child develops, you can also help her examine her preferences, strengths, and weaknesses, and personality traits. During these discussions, some difficult traits of the birth parent may come up, such as impulsive behaviors, aggressiveness or substance abuse. Many parents are afraid that in knowing these traits, the child will either be afraid of being like the birth family or may purposely try to connect with the birth family by mimicking the pattern. Now is the time to remind yourself and your child that almost all of personality traits — even aggression and other difficult characteristics — can be used positively or negatively. Have you ever seen a CEO or a professional sports person who wasn’t aggressive? Possessing the trait is not as important as how it is used. Also, with any medical or emotional trait that has a higher heritability, it is very important that your child understands how that MAY affect her, so she can make the healthiest possible life choices. You, as her parents, can help enormously with all of this.

- Help her understand that there are losses in adoption and to feel comfortable with the topic of loss. Often, adopted people feel guilty if they feel and/or talk about loss in connection with their adoption. They feel they are being disloyal to their adoptive parents and that talk about loss will hurt the adoptive parents. But just as you have learned that your sadness over the losses connected to adoption (through infertility, for example) have not affected your love for your child, you may have to teach her that she can be sad, at times, about her adoption losses and still love you very much. Sadness over losses in adoption does not have to affect happiness about its gains.
- Help her embrace all that she is by understanding that she is a combination of two family legacies, complete with a wide range of traits, capabilities and feelings. Help her understand that adoption has made her the unique person that she is.

The best way for you to help you child with all of this is for you to first understand, honor and embrace the concept of two family legacies in adoption. You are the most important vehicle in helping your child see her adoption in a healthy, positive light. Adoption is a very important part of her self-definition because she truly is a unique blend of two family legacies.

Francis Portnoy has a Masters Degree in Guidance and Counseling and does pre- and post-adoption training for several agencies in her area as well as maintaining a private practice. Her book, One Wonderful You, is reviewed in this issue of Pact Point of View. She was adopted at birth and lives in Greensboro with her two children. She can be contacted at 336-834-8222.