

# MAKING THE DECISION TO ADOPT

by Ellen Singer, LCSW-C

People adopt children for a variety of reasons. Some people parenting children by birth adopt because of a wish to expand their families and/or provide a home for a child in need. Single people wishing to parent often adopt. Some adopt because they feel that they are too old to pursue pregnancy and birth. And of course, both singles and couples adopt as a result of primary infertility and secondary infertility\* (failure to conceive after having biological child(ren). For these would-be parents, adoption is usually a second choice, or even a third choice for those who attempted and failed to conceive through “third party reproduction” (donor egg or sperm, surrogacy, etc.) While the decision to adopt after infertility comes easily to some people, most people do not experience this decision as easily. Instead, the decision making process in adoption is usually quite difficult, emotionally challenging and involves quite a bit of “soul searching.”

## Loss and Grief

When a person is not able to conceive, he or she is forced to confront just what it means to them to be a parent. Such contemplation involves a very personal, individual process. This is why it is so vitally important to recognize that the well-meaning advice of others can be so troublesome. While adoption is a wonderful, valid way to build a family, it is not a “solution” to infertility and is not the right option for everyone. Infertility encompasses many kinds of losses which adoption cannot “fix” including:

- Loss of the fantasy biological child or additional biological children
- Loss of genetic heritage
- Loss of self-esteem related to ability to reproduce
- Loss of the pregnancy and birth experience
- Loss of control/privacy

The only loss that adoption can fix is the loss of the parenting experience. To make the decision to adopt, people must acknowledge, explore the significance of and grieve for all the losses which adoption cannot “cure.”

When someone is grieving, they move back and forth between the stages of denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance. As a result, it is not uncommon to vacillate in one’s desire to pursue fertility treatment versus considering an alternative option such as adoption. In addition, as grieving is an individual process, one member of a couple may be ready to consider adoption while their spouse is not. It is important to recognize how grief can impact one’s feelings about adoption. A lack of enthusiasm about adoption may not mean that a person will never want to consider adoption as much as it may reflect the fact that the person needs more time to work through the losses associated with infertility. On the other hand, couples who move quickly into adoption need to make certain they are not doing this to avoid the painful feelings of grief, as this can result in difficulties later on.

## Is Adoption Right for You?

There are many important questions that all prospective adoptive parents can ask themselves to help determine both IF adoption is the right option for them to build their family and WHICH OPTION they may wish to pursue (domestic, international, same race vs. transracial, open adoption, etc.)

- Can I accept and love a child that I did not give birth to, who may look nothing like me and who may be very different from me?
- Can I cope with little or no information about my child’s birth family, or with difficult information?

## Making the Decision to Adopt

(continued from page 1)

- How do my extended family members feel about adoption?
- What type of child can I love? Can I love a child of a different race? Am I prepared to incorporate my child's race/culture into the family, ensure that my family has significant, meaningful connections with people of my child's race/culture, and help my child/family learn how to deal with racism?
- Can I respect the significance of the birth parents to my child and provide an open atmosphere in which adoption is freely discussed, questions welcomed and feelings validated?
- How do I feel about relationships with birth parents and their families?
- Adoption is a one-time event with lifelong implications. Am I committed to my education about adoption to meet my child's needs over time?

It is important to note that attitudes and feelings about adoption can change over time and with experience, confidence and continued education. When people do decide to pursue adoption and learn about the different options, sorting out the plan that is right for them can be complex. In addition to the above questions, prospective adoptive parents must evaluate how the options fit with each person/couple's unique priorities, personalities, beliefs and resources. Some couples may choose to adopt a child of another race or culture because they feel it will enrich family life as they strengthen or cultivate relationships with people of different races. Others may value their privacy as a family and feel less comfortable with a transracial adoption that means the likelihood of dealing with public attention and experiencing racism. Some adopters will actively pursue an open adoption, believing continued contact post-placement is in everyone's best interests. Others may need to work on building trust with birth parents over time before being comfortable with increasing contact.. Whatever option is decided upon, it is recommended that prospective parents connect with others who have pursued that option for ongoing moral support and advice. It is also recommended that if you think you want a "closed adoption," you need more education to understand the importance of birth parents to adopted children. Of course, not every family may be able to have contact with birth parents for many reasons—but that should be viewed as something unfortunate, not desirable..

Adoptive parents gradually find that, although adoption may have been their "second or third" choice for building a family, it no longer feels like "second best." Until placement occurs, however, feelings of ambivalence may remain because of normal anxiety related to the "unknown." (Even people who are about to give birth often feel ambivalent!) The belief that adoption is not "second best" may not come until after placement; consequently, many people experience the decision as a "leap of faith." Connecting with other adoptive parents is extremely beneficial during the "waiting period" between the decision to adopt and actual placement.

### Adoption Education

Ambivalence about adopting can also surface in response to many aspects of the adoption process and adoptive family life. The decisions involved in determining which type of adoption to pursue, in addition to the home study process, paperwork, costs, time commitment, uncertainty, invasion of privacy, possible foreign travel, etc. can be daunting or overwhelming for people. Stories about people's negative experiences with adoption can be frightening. Therefore it is imperative that prospective adopters learn as much as possible about adoption to dispel myths, misinformation and distorted media presentations. There are many avenues to take to learn about adoption:

- Read books/articles about adoption (Visit the C.A.S.E. website at [www.adoptionsupport.org](http://www.adoptionsupport.org) in February for resources and a bibliography of recommended books.)
- Attend workshops, webinars and adoption agency information meetings
- Connect with adoptive family support groups – talk with adoptive parents, adopted adults, birth parents
- Consult with a C.A.S.E. or other adoption-competent therapist

[www.adoptionsupport.org](http://www.adoptionsupport.org)



nurture. inspire. empower.