

## The Terminology of Adoption

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*Editors's Note: The author's clarification of the language of adoption strikes us as, in the main, correct, sensitive and beneficial. We strongly second her comments in the concluding paragraph of the article.*

The words we use are a vital part of educating people about adoption. Words do more than convey facts; they evoke feelings. A word or phrase intended to create a positive impression may have the opposite effect. We have to be aware of the emotional weight of the words used, and choose language with care.

Words used to describe persons can become labels. A word can label the person it describes as a member of a category. Such labels do not take into account the unique characteristics of an individual. Vocabulary is also affected by cultural change. The meanings and feeling tones conveyed by certain words may not be the same today as they were a generation ago. And at any given time the same word or phrase may have different connotations for different persons.

Social service professionals and adoptive parents should take responsibility for providing informed and sensitive leadership in the use of words. For adoptive parents, a positive use of vocabulary may encourage open communication within their families. For professionals, the choice of vocabulary helps shape service content and reflects, in turn, the quality of service. The words used not only mirror insights and feelings; they intimately affect ability to help clients.

Choosing emotionally "correct" words is especially important in

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adoption transactions. For example, speaking to new adopting parents about "your daughter" or "your son" validates and strengthens the cognitive process by which parenthood becomes a reality. Using the phrase "the child you are adopting" conveys a very different message. The first conveys the emotional reality of parenthood; the second merely reflects the technical procedure of adding a child to the family.

### Terms Related to Children

"Child" is a general term, signifying a young human being in need of parenting, dependent on adults. The word itself does not connote family membership. The term "*my child*" indicates that the child is a particular person's responsibility and belongs to a particular family unit. It does not indicate "ownership," but rather a tie of responsibility. "My child" shares a place to live, a family name, and family love, presumably permanently. No genetic mother can say, "This child is all my own," since half of the genetic descent comes from the biological father's side. The mother is the vehicle through which the child's genetic endowment from a long line of ancestors has passed.

Through adoption, children can receive full family (kinship) status in families into which they were not born. Family membership by social contract has not only legal support, but social and emotional support—at least in theory. But lack of clarity in terms designating kinship causes confusion for many persons. Some of the vocabulary describing the role of a child in an adoptive family follows.

"*My child*" versus "*my adopted child*." The latter phrase evokes the question, "Is not the child you got by way of adoption your own child?" Any adoptive parent will declare emphatically that the adopted child is the family's very own child, even if not biologically.

"*My own son*" versus "*my adopted son*." Picture a family with two boys, one born to the parents, the other adopted. My son, Paul (who was adopted) told me about a family with two children who were introduced as "our own son" and "our Korean son." The word "son" may describe the same social and emotional role content for both children, but the designation "my own son" reflects a sense of "belonging" not felt for the other child. In the case of a Korean child or a black child with two white parents, appearance explains the genetic diversity without need for verbal clarification. It is all the more important, then, to underline the emotional and social belonging.

"*Adopted child*." This term stresses how a child came to be part of a family. When persistently used by parents, "adopted" emphasizes difference, the implication being "I'm not responsible for this child's biological heredity."

"*Biological child*" or "*our child by birth*." Both terms are accurate and useful ways to describe direct descent from the parents of conception.

"*Illegitimate child*." This term literally means that a child legally has no father. Historically, the term refers to ineligibility to claim family membership in one's kin group and inheritance rights from the father. This label attached to a child is often used derogatively. Through adoption, a child born out of wedlock can receive full family membership; thus the issue of legitimacy is not pertinent. The phrase "born out of wedlock" is clearly preferable to "illegitimate child."

"*Unwanted child*." This is another term that puts an unnecessary onus on a child as being somehow unsatisfactory. In reality, it was the role of parent that was "unwanted" by the biological parents when the child was born.

### Terms Related to Transfer

In speaking of adoption as the transfer of a child from genetic parent(s) to a permanent functional kinship group, it is preferable to use terminology that accurately reflects that process. This must be done first in dealing with the biological parent(s) and their families, next for the sake of the adopting family, later for the child who was adopted, and ultimately for the education of the general public. The difference between ancestry and functional family membership should be understood by everyone, not just intellectually but emotionally.

Many frequently used phrases fail to describe accurately the transfer of parental rights from the biological parents to the parents of adoption. Some examples follow.

"*Put up for adoption*." Such phrases, common in the public languages of adoption, militate against acceptance of adoption as an orderly, positive, social and legal process. The term dates back to the 1890s, when 90,000 orphans were brought to small Midwestern communities by train and exhibited in churches and town halls so that the town folk could choose ones to take into their homes. The children were placed up high, so they could be easily seen. They were literally "put up for adoption."

*"Adopted out."* This expression conveys the sense of being separated from original in-group membership and shipped off into an uncertain somewhere.

*"Given away."* This phrase attributes a callous and uncaring motive to the biological parents.

*"Abandoned," "left with the agency," "left on the doorstep."* Such phrases, which indicate that biological parents had no concern for their children's safety and welfare, can be extremely upsetting to children.

*"Given up," "relinquished," "surrendered."* These terms, which imply that children were torn out of the arms of their mothers by an unfeeling state or social agency, may encourage adopted children to fantasy about being reunited with their biological parents.

The following phrases are better ways of describing the transfer process:

- Arranging for an adoption
- Making a placement plan for a child
- Delegating an agency to find permanent parents for a child
- Arranging for a transfer of parental rights
- Transferring parenting to others who are ready for this long-term task
- Finding a family who will adopt a child
- Selecting an appropriate family to parent the child

Adoption transfers all parental rights to others ready to assume them. When biological parents are unable to make an adequate permanent plan for their child, society (via the courts) attempts to make a plan in the child's best interest. The court first explores the capacity and willingness of the biological parents to parent the child. The birth parents have the right to delegate or transfer parental rights and obligations, the first step before a child may be legally tied into another family unit. To "give up a child" is an erroneous expression, because a person cannot be "owned." One may, however, give up parental rights. When biological parents make an adoption plan for a child, they are not only terminating parental rights, but delegating to others the parenting of their child. When the court steps in to terminate parental rights without consent of the bioparents, the chances are that the latter filled the role inadequately or not at all.

### Terms Related to Contact

The efforts of some adopted adults to establish contact with their biological parents have been widely publicized. Newspapers and magazines often present such stories in very dramatic ways—almost as modern-day fairy tales. (Daughter at last finds "real" mother, and everybody lives happily ever after.) Exploiting the emotional content in these situations, reporters and writers often ignore the fact that adopted adults have ineradicable ties to their adoptive families.

*"Reunion."* The use of this word to describe contact with a biological parent tends to imply that the social contract of adoption had been dissolved and the adopted individual has been reinstated in the biological family. In reality, the desire to establish contact often reflects no more than the wish of many adopted persons to take a look at their biological ancestors. If the adopted person remembers being parented by her or his biological family, a later meeting may indeed be experienced as a "reunion." However, because of its implication that the adoption tie has been undone, this word is best avoided.

*"Making contact with," "meeting with," "getting in touch with."* These phrases are more accurate ways of describing adopted adults' encounters with their families of descent.

### Terms Related to Ancestry

Language that clarifies relationships and precisely reflects time factors is essential to the transmission of biological background history. For the sake of everyone involved in the adoption process, kinship terminology should be employed with insight and accuracy. The language used to describe kinship is also important in suggesting appropriate role behavior.

In compiling a child's biological and social history for the adoptive family, for example, the biological parent's relatives should not be labelled as the child's "grandmother," "uncle," or "aunt." Rather, in describing the child's family of descent, kinship terms should indicate relationships with the biological mother or father, not the child. This semantic strategy legitimates the fact that the child is assuming full

membership in the adopting family. When an older child is being placed, such terms as "biological aunt," "biograndmother," and "first grandfather" might be used to differentiate appropriately between "old" and "new" family members.

For biological parents, a clear semantic separation of biological realities from social realities may be helpful in grasping the important emotional fact that their child will no longer be occupying a role of family membership in the kinship group of biological origin. Appropriate language stresses the severance of both moral and legal responsibilities and emphasizes that there can be no social or emotional role expectations. Not only will the child be perceived as acquiring firm, clear family ties to the adopting family group, but it will be brought home in a positive way that the child will be gaining a functional familial association via adoption.

If kinship terminology is used accurately from the outset, a maturing adopted child will view her or his background history comfortably and in the proper perspective. Pertinent facts about genetic ancestry can be sought and learned without confusion about social identity, including family membership.

The following terms are commonly used to refer to biological parents. Some are accurate and usually appropriate; others are ambiguous, confusing, or simply incorrect.

*"Prenatal mother,"* This term is descriptive in regard to the time continuum and factually correct, but is not in popular use.

*"Birth mother,"* or *"mother of birth."* These terms are useful in differentiating the biological process and the childrearing process.

*"The woman who gave birth to you."* An expression useful in explaining birth to a young child.

*"First mother (or father)."* This term is accurate only if the birth-giving mother or biological father did some parenting during the postnatal period. If they never functioned as parents, their contribution was limited to the prenatal and birth-giving process. Only in the case of an older child who experienced some parenting from his birth parents is it correct to speak of a "first mother" or "first father." The parenting given by foster parents, whom the child may clearly remember, does not represent a full kinship tie.

*"Natural parent."* This term, used primarily in legal contexts, implies that the adoptive parent is somehow unnatural, "artificial."

*"Biological parent,"* or *"bioparent."* These words are used widely and comfortably; they differentiate as well as designate.

*"Genetic parent."* This term is useful in that it describes shared heredity potential.

*"Unmarried mother."* This label is often affixed to biological mothers of adopted children by agencies and by the public. Besides presuming the reason (which may or may not be correct) why many birth-givers did not take on parenting of children born to them, this term confuses marital status with relationship to a child. Since many functional parents today are unmarried, for one reason or another, this term might best be consigned to the scrap heap.

*"Real mother,"* *"real father."* What constitutes a "real" parent? In terms of familial relationships and social functions, the "real" parents are the adoptive parents, not the biological parents. The adoptive parents care for the child, nurture growth, transmit knowledge and values. The biological parents brought a child into the world; the adoptive parents help the child to cope with the world—a challenging task, and just as "real." To apply the term exclusively to biological parents is grossly inaccurate.

*"Begetter."* Sometimes used to refer to the biological father of the child, this word is stilted and archaic.

*"Young man responsible for the child's birth."* Adults often say to children, "Who is responsible for this mess?" or "Who is responsible for this misdeed?" The judgmental quality of this expression makes it a poor choice.

### Terms Related to Siblings

Adopted children become brothers or sisters to any other children of their adopting parents even though they do not share biological descent. Adopted siblings refer to one another simply as "my brother" or "my sister." Like any siblings, as adults they will share a common set of memories. Children reared in the same environment naturally develop a sense of siblingship—a sense that includes internalization of the incest taboo. Children of the same biological parents who were not reared together may refer to one another as "biological brother (sister)," "biological sibling" or "other children born of my biological mother (father)." The sibling relationship must have a legal basis as well as an experiential basis to become a psychosocial reality.

### Terms Related to Adoptive Parents

An adoptive mother becomes a child's parent via the transfer of parental rights. Socially and functionally, she does the permanent mothering of the child, becoming the successor to the biological mother. Often she is the only mother a child can recall knowing.

In the same way, the father by adoption is a child's permanent father—legally, socially and emotionally. He occupies a specific place and plays a precise role in the family unit—the microculture in which the child is reared, to which the child belongs, and in which the child plays an integral part. Even after the childrearing process is completed, the child who entered the family unit by adoption remains a member of the kinship circle.

The terms "adoptive mother" and "adoptive father" have been used throughout this paper to describe one component of the adoption triad. Whether the descriptive adjective has to be retained outside the context of adoption-related discussion seems highly questionable. Why should parents who have assumed the same legal and social responsibilities borne by all other parents in society be permanently labeled by the process by which they acquire a child?

Furthermore, the term "adoptive parent" implies a conditional parenthood, a qualification of allegiance, a suggestion that the family relationship is tentative and temporary. Although it correctly delineates postnatal parenthood and clarifies the absence of an ancestral relationship, such a label places in doubt the authenticity of the family tie. At worst, its use can hinder internalization of the concept of a permanent family relationship that fully includes a child who was adopted. An alternative term, "postnatal parent," sounds cold and clumsy.

The author recommends that such labels be dropped for everyday use (though of course it should be explained openly to an adopted child, at an appropriate time, how she or he came into the family).

### Terms Related to Other Kinds of "Parents"

Two terms that have nothing to do with adoption are frequently misused to signify adoptive parenthood.

"*Stepparent.*" This word implies that two persons do not possess shared genetic material, and it sometimes describes a social and func-

tional family relationship. However, in the case of a stepparent there is not always a transfer of parental ties, either legal or social.

"*Foster parent.*" This term is occasionally used mistakenly, especially by the press, to describe parents by adoption. This confusion reflects a serious misunderstanding of adoption as a temporary arrangement, since foster parenthood does not involve a transfer of parental rights and obligations. Misuse of the term is a disservice to foster parents—who, although their relationships to children are usually time limited, provide important parenting to children who cannot live with their birth parents or who are awaiting adoptive placement.

### A Final Note

As "enlightened" professionals become accustomed to identifying and using correct terms in talking about adoption, it is essential to avoid sitting in judgment of others who, out of different values or ignorance, use language that is repugnant. The professional's role must encompass a kind of gentle education of persons who unwittingly continue to confuse and distort adoption terminology.

It is essential to make sure that the language of adoption is understandable to the nonprofessional, and that attention to vocabulary is always in the interest of the persons involved in adoption itself. An essentially simple and orderly human transaction, one invested with deep feeling for everyone involved, should not be confused or made more complex by the use of imprecise language. After all, the language of adoption is loving communication among members of a family created by social contract, sustained by their life together, and supported by an informed society that validates the integrity of the family. ☆

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