

**Transition, Identity and Belongingness:
Adding children through adoption or foster care[©]**
(by Michael Kinzer, JD, MA, LMFT)¹

A little personal history

My interest in adoption and foster care is both profoundly personal and an important part of my professional life as a therapist working with adoptees and their families. At the age of 12, after my mother left town, and as the County condemned our house as unfit for human habitation and child protection began to investigate my father's abuses, my great aunt told me she wanted to adopt me. She thought she was going to "rescue" me from the fate of my family. I said "no," despite both of us knowing I might not survive if I didn't leave my birth home soon. A year later, I was in a very nice foster home. I had sheets for the first time in my life, a nice house, plenty to eat, a good school, and no parent beating me. My foster mom asked me if she could adopt me. I said "no," even though my "prior life" had been such a mess. She kicked me out, and there began several years in and out of different group homes, treatment centers, a halfway house, back home, until finally finding a foster home which was able to love me, while respecting my need to find an identity that did not require me to deny where I had come from. I still have contact with that foster family, and think of them as a second family, which doesn't replace, but adds to my biological family. My personal history explains my enthusiasm for providing therapy to families with adopted and foster children.

Framework for the issues in adoption and foster care

The primary problems that occur when families add a new child through adoption or foster care involve:

- (1) transition and rule/role changes within and outside the new family;
- (2) identity concerns for the child; and
- (3) belongingness or attachment between the child and their new and old families and communities.

Transition issues are not unique to adoption or foster care—they occur when any family adds a new child. This is natural, even when the added child is born to the parents in the family. In that sense, it is an issue which can and usually is addressed openly, logically, and effectively in most families. When the child is added through foster care or adoption, though, families can struggle with openly addressing these issues because they require members of the family to also address issues of identity, belongingness and attachment with the new child. Depending on the circumstances involved, the importance of each of these areas of concern can be very different with adoption than they are with foster care, but not necessarily so. This article will take a look at each of these areas of concern and describe common ways they occur in adoption and foster care scenarios, followed by suggestions for ways families can cope with these various areas of concern in a way that recognize the needs of everyone involved.

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In its simplest terms, when a family adds a child through adoption or foster care, a child moves from one family to another, facilitated by an outside agency. At a minimum, this process always involves the following “stakeholders” or interested parties:

- (1) the adopted or foster child(ren);
- (2) the child(ren)’s biological parents;
- (3) the new family’s parents and siblings (if any);
- (4) the facilitating agency (county social workers and other staff); and
- (5) the communities of the biological family and the new family.

Although this list seems obvious, in many adoptive or foster care situations, many of these stakeholders might be completely or partially ignored. This has changed considerably in recent years, but can still be a very serious problem. This article focuses specifically on the needs of the adopted or foster care child or children (to which I will simply refer as the “child”). However, we must attend to the needs and perspectives of everyone on this list to encourage a system that can fully support all of the needs of the child.

In the best of all worlds, everyone involved has as their primary concern the best interests of the adoptive or foster care children. Even so, it can be easy to make assumptions about the best interests of the child that ignore the most significant needs of the child because other concerns take priority and the child may not be aware of those issues or how to express them (due to age, fear, confusion, etc.). This is perhaps the most tragic of all circumstances: when the assumptions about a child’s needs trump the actual needs in a way that prevents either the child or the parents and helpers from addressing those needs. Ironically, the more someone is emotionally invested in the process, the more they may find it difficult or impossible to understand how they are not meeting the needs of the child. Take my story of my first foster mother above. I have no doubt that her heart was in the right place—that she thought her offer of adoption was doing me a great favor, by rescuing me from what was a terrible place I had been before coming into her home. In that sense, her willingness to make me “her” child was in its way a beautiful and tender-hearted gesture. It may have been for this precise reason that she was unable to see that my identity and my sense of belongingness were still very much attached to that other “horrible” place, because it had already begun to define me and I had strong attachments to my siblings and even to parents who had neglected and abused me. And for that reason, even though she offered me something which on the surface seemed so much greater, it was still foreign to me, and felt uncomfortable, and even unreal.

The needs of the child...

Every child is different. Every child has come from a different place, is going into a different place, and has different needs of their own. What is common though among adopted and foster care children? Every child who faces adoption or foster care or both, no matter what their age, gender, and other factors at the time they enter a new family, will inevitably face issues of identity, belongingness and attachment that are unique to adoption and foster care. I mean *every child, without exception*. In my practice as a therapist for the past seven years, I have witnessed many adoptive and foster families steadfastly refuse to acknowledge this simple fact about their adopted child, which is usually the main reason they are at my office. The issues of identity, belongingness and attachment need not lead to serious mental health or behavioral issues for the child or any other member of the family. Identity issues almost always surface later on in life, either in adolescence or adulthood, which can be adequately addressed by a supportive and understanding family that allows the child to explore these issues without fear of reprisal or accusations of disloyalty or ingratitude. Parents often come to my office with their children convinced that what the child needs most is to be steered back toward the family as the only unit of importance for the child. Yet, this is simply not true. And the more the parents push this agenda, the more trouble they will have with their child, and the more difficult it will become for the child to resolve their issues of identity, belongingness, and attachment. Even in the worst case scenario, where a child’s biological parents are either unattainable, or there are legal and practical reasons the child should have no contact with their biological parents, the child will still want to know where they come from (belongingness questions), what this means about

who they are (identity questions), and whether they have any desire to form an attachment with their biological family of origin in addition to their adoptive or foster care family (attachment questions).

Having worked for several years in the child protection system in Hennepin County, I both understand and appreciate the legal necessities involved in terminating the parental rights of a parent who poses a danger to their children. I have witnessed on several occasions court proceedings that led to this result, and rightly so, for the sake of the child. This result can also provide much needed stability and comfort to a family wishing to adopt a child and know that the child will no longer be subjected to the negative influences of their biological parents. Yet, this does not end the matter for the child, even if it does for the Judge, the County, the biological parents, and the adoptive or foster care parents. The child will still need to satisfy himself or herself that they are where they belong and how they feel about themselves (who they are as people) in light of where they come from.

The kinds of differences between the biological family and the new family can greatly influence a child's ability to adjust to their new surroundings and how they end up resolving differences between where they come from and where they are. For instance, it is not surprising that a white child born to a middle-class mother and father in Minneapolis who is adopted by a white middle class family in Eagan may have less adjustment issues than a Korean baby born to a working-class, single mother in Korea, who after several years in an orphanage, is adopted by that same middle class white family on the other side of the planet. The white child will simply have less to adjust to than the Korean child, either because there is less difference in how they look and feel with their new family (and the way others view the child with their new family), or because the family is more able to support the child's search for their own identity when that child's origination is more similar to the adoptive family's own origination. A middle-class white family in Eagan does not need to reach as far beyond its own understanding of culture, race, and class to help a white adopted child find a place of comfort and satisfaction with themselves than they would have to reach for the Korean child. In many cases, though, the adoptive family may make little or no effort for the white or the Korean child to understand its identity at all, believing that the best way to encourage attachment and a sense of belongingness for the child is to either ignore or actively discourage the child from learning anything about their biological family and community. Likewise, a child of color adopted by a white family may feel prohibited from calling attention to the racism she experiences in her white suburban school and neighborhood because her white adoptive parents might take it as a sign of ingratitude or blame. So she may try to ignore or deny the racism and other identity issues, leading to feelings of powerlessness, resentment, shame, self-hatred, alienation and loneliness then and later on in her adult life.

Solutions for the child, also work for the parents

The best thing I can do for an adopted or foster care child who comes to see me in therapy is to give them permission and a space to begin asking the very questions they have been asking silently all along without any expectation or agenda about how they should answer such questions. "Where do I come from (place, culture, biology, other family, community, history of my people)?" "What does this mean about why I am not still there (why they abandoned me, or was it the right thing to do, to take me from them)?" "What does my leaving that place mean about how I am still connected to that place (should I go back and find out or leave it alone, am I still one of "them" even though I was raised here)?" "What does it mean about my sense of loyalty and belongingness to my new family that I still care about these other questions, these other people?" "Does it make me ungrateful to want to explore these ideas?" "Is it my adoptive parents' fault that I was subjected to racism at school, by other kids, by their extended family?" "Should I resent my adopted mom and dad for discouraging these questions when it is clear now that I have been damaged by such discouragement?" "Does it mean I am not really attached to my new family if I want to know more about my biological family and their history?" "And if do not feel attached to my adoptive family in the same way as others who are not adopted, does this mean that I am not attached to anyone?" "Can I be attached to anyone?" "Where is my home?" By giving permission to the child to ask these and any other questions, if the parents are willing to also be supportive, everyone can become involved in growing their attachment to each other, without letting insecurities about such issues keep them hidden and unresolved.