

Listening to Adult Adoptees

A lesson for adoptive parents

October 01,2007 / Terra Trevor



Often it takes place within a discussion on an adoption e-list. Recently it happened again at a breakout session at an adoption conference. My friend Jennifer sits down across from me and begins talking with an adoptive mother. Both Jennifer and the woman's 11-year-old daughter are adopted from Korea .

"Where did you grow up, and what about the guys you date?" The mother asks, looking over the tops of her reading glasses. She raises her eyebrows. **"Do you go out with Asians?"**

Jennifer freezes. She sighs and shrugs her shoulders, her expression so dramatically changes across her face like a rain cloud blocking the sun. Then my friend composes herself and begins to open up. But within minutes this mother overrides everything Jennifer has shared and begins giving her the low down.

The carpet beneath my feet seems to press upward, and I wish I could become part of the wall. It's unintentional; of course, this adoptive mother thinks she is only asking appropriate questions, giving an appropriate lecture, and that it's OK to expect an adult adoptee to open up her life for her examination.

As the mother of a Korean-born son and daughter I've met my share of nosy questions, but now the tables are turned. Instead of the quizzical stares and rude comments from strangers that trailed me when my kids were young, today the probing questions and silencing comments I hear slip from the mouths of adoptive parents, and are directed towards adopted adults.

Adoptive parents both create and reflect adoptive parenting attitudes and social values. We are familiar with the difficulties of fielding intrusive comments, so why have so many begun to speak out inappropriately to adopted adults?

We can shrug it off. After all, they mean well. They have children who are at the center of their lives, desperately important, deeply loved, and they are only wanting to talk with someone who has walked the adoptee path, to shed a little light on the adult journey their child will someday embark on.

They may have good intentions, but they aren't doing their best job of remembering. From experience we know the burden of educating others is oppressive. When our children first joined our family the job of educating those outside of the adoption triad fell to us, their parents. We are the generation of adoptive parents who worked towards setting the bounds of privacy while empowering our children to face bothersome questions. We formed an adoption community committed to teaching our kids to insist on the right of privacy early on, to know that what feels private can

legitimately be kept private.

All interracial adoptive families attract a certain amount of attention. When our kids are babies there are days when we can't get through the supermarket without being stopped by a stranger or two, being chased down the aisle by someone who wants to ask us entirely inappropriate questions. If we are wise we take cues from our kids. At first we might enjoy the notice, but usually our children do not. From practice we parents learn that fielding too many questions wears on our spirit. In parenting we worry about doing our best to help our children deal with the expectations others may have of them as they get older. So by the time most adult adoptees begin facing rude comments and nosy questions on their own, they've had years of watching their parents model empowering answers, with a mind set that lets them know they have the right to choose whether and how to respond to intrusive questioning.

"In the best interest of the child" is a concept that consistently is embraced as a core principle of adoption. Those children whose best interest we want to protect grow up to be adults who hold their own rights to privacy. We're fortunate in today's paradigm we have those adopted adults who are willing to be interpreters of the adult adoptee perspective and are willing to share personal information. Yet it's important to remember that *not all adoptees enjoy being the object of curiosity*. While being open all along with our children is key, we do not have the right to expect that same level of openness with adults we barely know, just because they happen to have been adopted.

Adopted adults should not be singled out and queried unless they have volunteered themselves as a bridge, and even then there are boundaries that need to be respected.

Each of us in the adoption community is part of an on-going conversation. We are a tapestry of voices. Adoptees, birth parents, and adoptive parents each have in-dwelling wisdom to offer. There is an African proverb that serves to remind us. A single bracelet does not jangle. When we listen, show respect, and grow through our interactions with one another, we all become diggers in a far richer mine.

To those adoptive parents who lean towards over powering statements made by adopted adults, I counsel the following:

Picture yourself 20 years from now. What kind of relationship do you hope to have with your child? As your children reach adulthood, you will need to keep some of your comments to yourself. Begin practicing now. When adopted adults speak out, or offer to answer questions, listen with a benevolent ear, treat them with dignity and offer them the same respect you will want your own children to receive when they reach adulthood. Being respectful to another adoptive parent's adult son or daughter is one of the most important things an adoptive parent can do.

This article was first published in a slightly different form in the June/July 2004 issue of [Adoption Today](#) magazine. Copyright 2004-2007, Terra Trevor. Author of [Pushing Up the Sky](#) published by KAAAN.