

Robin K. Fox



Infants Through Preschool

## Welcoming Families With Children Who Were Adopted

Marco, age 2½, was adopted from Guatemala. This is his third week with his forever family and his second week in child care. Adjusting to child care takes time for children, but for Marco the adjustment is exceptional because *everything* is new. The teachers notice that during naptime, Marco moves his body in an attempt to stay awake. They ask Marco's parents about it.

Because Marco speaks only Spanish and the teachers do not, they rely on one of Marco's parents, Jake, who is fluent in Spanish to talk to Marco about naptime. They learn that Marco worries that the other children will take his belongings while he sleeps, like they did in the foster home. The parents hadn't seen this behavior at home because Marco is an only child.

The teachers work with Marco's parents to make a plan that includes reassuring Marco that his things won't be taken. They let him leave items in the office during rest time so that he doesn't worry about them. Through careful observation and an intentional conversation with Marco's parents, the teachers have assisted Marco with a transitional issue specific to adoption.

**M**ARCO REPRESENTS ONE OF MORE than 1.5 million children who have been adopted and live in the United States (US Census Bureau 2012). Although adoption is not new, adoption processes and who is adopting children have changed. Few teachers have training related to working with families

formed through adoption (Meese 2012) and instead gather information from media, friends, and the family members themselves (Taymans et al. 2008). In a 2012 survey, researchers found more than half of the American adults who were polled were not at all familiar or were somewhat familiar with adoption in general (Harris Interactive 2013). In this article I refer to children who *were adopted*—past tense—because the children were part of a process that has ended. (Some people in the adoption community prefer *are adopted*—present tense—because being a child who was adopted is an ongoing process of understanding.)

## Shifts in adoption practices

Adoption practices have changed significantly over the past several decades. Two of the changes are an increase in domestic open adoptions (Siegel & Smith 2012) and a greater understanding of how international adoption can impact children (Niemann & Weiss 2011). These two shifts can influence children and families, which means that they are important areas for educators to understand.

### Domestic open adoption

The cloud of secrecy that once surrounded adoption is no longer as prevalent. The term *open adoption* used to mean that there was some information sharing between the birth family and the adoptive family. Now, in addition to sharing information before adoption, open adoption may include information sharing after the adoption and possibly the development of an ongoing relationship between the birth family and the forever family (Jones & Hackett 2008). This broader definition has implications for early childhood educators about changes in policies, forms, materials, and understanding. Teachers can broaden their understanding about adoption—and in particular open adoptions—by reading books and information on websites on the topic (see “Resources About Adoption,” p. 18).

### The needs of children adopted internationally

In 2011 there were approximately 23,600 international adoptions worldwide (Voight & Brown 2013). Children adopted internationally may have unique needs related to attachment, language, gross motor development, health and medical care, and food and nutrition, among others.

**Attachment.** Niemann and Weiss (2011) found that children whose pre-adoption care as infants included an orphanage rather than foster care might have more difficulty with attachment. They do note, however, that

with repeated interactions with adults who attend to the children’s needs, children appear to be able to regain trust and form healthy attachments.

**Language.** A review of multiple studies related to language and children who were adopted internationally found that these children appear to have more difficulties with language (often because they are learning a new language), especially if adopted after the age of 1 year (Scott, Roberts, & Glennen 2011).

**Gross motor development.** Children adopted internationally may also struggle with gross motor development. Children who were in orphanages may have lacked opportunities for gross motor activity and are more likely to have delays in this area when compared to their peers who were not in orphanages (Roerber et al. 2012).

**Health and medical care.** Children adopted internationally are at higher risk of medical problems than their peers who were adopted domestically (Smit 2010). This higher risk can result from intestinal parasites, infectious diseases likely to spread in an orphanage, lack of medical treatment, and lack of medical supplies such as antibiotics.

**Food and nutrition.** Some children who lived in orphanages or who did not receive adequate nutrition may enter their forever families and child care settings with health issues related to malnutrition. Additionally, when first joining their forever families some children may be overwhelmed by the abundance of food and may overeat for a period of time. Usually this behavior changes as children begin to trust that food will always be available.

**Lolla is 20 months old and it is her third week in child care and her second month in her new home after being adopted. She was in a hospital orphanage for the first 18 months of her life. Her mother is thrilled with her progress and notifies the program staff that Lolla eats large quantities of food. The staff understand and agree that it is important that Lolla trust that there will always be food. This week they notice that she is eating less food and eating more slowly.**

### Implications for teachers

Teachers may be able to help families of children who were adopted internationally in unique ways. They can support the child and family and become partners in the transition by sharing their knowledge and experience. For example, together they can determine when a child might need assistance with language or gross motor development or discuss the importance of consistent routines that support children’s healthy attachments. They can offer families—especially first-time parents—help in recognizing health issues.

**Program staff notice that Lolla pulls on her ears, something she did not do in the first two weeks, but she doesn’t cry or show signs of distress. At pickup time, a teacher mentions this to Lolla’s mom. The next day, Lolla’s mom calls the center to tell the teacher that Lolla**

#### About the Author

**Robin K. Fox, PhD,** is department chair of Curriculum and Instruction at the University of Wisconsin at Whitewater. Robin is an early childhood faculty member and a member of the board of directors for the Wisconsin Early Childhood Association. Additionally, Robin is the parent of two children who were adopted. [foxr@uw.edu](mailto:foxr@uw.edu)

has massive double ear infections. The doctor believes she has suffered from several ear infections in the past. Lolla's mom suggests to the teacher that perhaps Lolla used to cry about the infections but when her cries weren't answered, she learned to put up with the pain. The teacher is glad that she helped, and Lolla's mom is grateful to have Lolla in a child care program with observant staff.

Issues related to attachment are more common for children who were adopted, but early childhood teachers can play a critical role in helping all children form healthy attachments. Teachers can help children who may have attachment issues (either too much or too little attachment to important adults) by offering consistent care and comfort through nurturing touch, words, and kind voice throughout the child's time at the program. To form healthy attachments, many children who were adopted have needs similar to all children. However, teachers may be especially aware of such needs in children who were adopted and be ready to offer more support. For example, a child who was adopted might not seek a teacher when hurt. The child may have been in an international orphanage with many children and few caregivers where, when she was hurt, the adult did not have time to comfort her. In an early childhood setting, it is important for teachers to be aware of the child's past experiences and to support her when she is hurt, even if she does not seek attention. Talking and sharing stories about what happens at school with the families

## Resources About Adoption

- **Adoptive Families** offers articles and resources from the perspective of parents, teachers, birth families, adoption counselors, physicians, psychologists, and others.  
[www.adoptivefamilies.com](http://www.adoptivefamilies.com)
- **Creating a Family** has numerous articles and podcasts related to adoption and attachment issues for families and teachers.  
[www.creatingafamily.org/adoption](http://www.creatingafamily.org/adoption)
- **The Dave Thomas Foundation** offers free posters reflecting multicultural families and families that have been formed through adoption or foster care.  
[www.davethomasfoundation.org](http://www.davethomasfoundation.org)
- **The Family Equality Council** provides resources for families and serves as national coordinator for families with parents who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender and local groups across the country.  
[www.familyequality.org](http://www.familyequality.org)
- **Tapestry Books** lists children's picture books with a variety of adoption themes.  
[www.tapestrybooks.com](http://www.tapestrybooks.com)

can help both the teachers and the families understand children's attachment needs.

Paulie was adopted at age 2 after spending the first two years of his life in an orphanage. He has been in the early childhood program for two weeks. Although he seems content, during diaper changing time Paulie often grabs for the teacher's gloved hands. He becomes upset when, after diapering, the teacher removes the gloves and tries to engage him in activities. It is only when a glove falls on the floor and Paulie gives it to the teacher that staff begin to understand. Paulie wants to be touched with gloved hands like he was in the orphanage.

The teachers honor this need, and Paulie often takes the teacher's gloved hands and rubs them against his cheek or arms. After receiving permission from Paulie's family, the teachers explain this to other families so they do not misinterpret the gloved hands as a response to a contagious disease. Through open communication with the families, the teachers comfort Paulie in a way that responds to his needs and reflects his past experiences.

## Adoption-friendly language

The language early childhood educators use when talking with children is important because they model language—words, expressions, tones of voice, appropriate responses, expressive reading—for all children they teach. But the language that teachers use with adult family members is also important.

### Language use with families

It is important for teachers to carefully consider their use of language to describe adoption (see “Adoption-Sensitive Language”). The simple misuse of a word (“real” parent) or a lighthearted comment (“Will you adopt me?”) can unintentionally upset or offend a family. For many people in the adoption world, the use of the word *adopt* for anything other than making a forever family might be problematic. Most adoptions are open (Siegel & Smith 2012) and many children who are not infants are aware they were adopted. Families may explain adoption to their children as a long process that requires dedication, tenacity, love, and caring. When *adopt* is used for other processes, such as *adopt a dolphin* or *adopt a highway*, it can be confusing to the children and distressing to the families. Children might think that adopting them was similar to going online to adopt an animal.

### Language use in program documents

Families with children who were adopted may need to respond to additional requirements or restrictions when they enroll the children in an early childhood program. One example is requiring families formed by adoption to supply birth certificates (with the forever parents' names) when

## Adoption-Sensitive Language

Less adoption friendly	More adoption friendly
Real mom, real dad, real parents	Use <i>birth mom, birth dad, birth parents</i> , and so on. <i>Birth parents</i> or <i>birth family</i> are more appropriate terms because the forever parents are indeed real parents.
Adoptive mom, adoptive dad, adoptive family	Simply say <i>mom, dad, parents</i> , and so on. If there is a reason to differentiate between a child's birth family and the family that adopted the child, use the term <i>forever family</i> .
Adopted child	Say <i>child</i> . When there is a reason to note that a child was adopted, say <i>child who was adopted</i> .
Couldn't have a child of their own	Avoid this phrase because it implies that adoption is second best to giving birth to a child. When the process of adoption is finalized, the child is legally the forever parents' own child. Use instead "The family wanted to adopt" or "The family chose adoption."
Gave up for adoption	Use <i>developed an adoption plan</i> . This is a more positive phrase for a birth mother, father, or family who terminated parental rights.
Needed someone else to be the parent	Avoid this phrase. Use language to clarify that it was not the child who was the issue but the circumstances. When a child enters a forever family, it is important to talk with the family about how to answer questions related to the birth family and the child's adoption.

(Adapted with permission from Meese 2012)

this is not required of other families. On the other hand, same-sex parents living in a state where they cannot legally marry might voluntarily share with program staff the birth certificate with their names to make it clear that they both have legal rights to the child.

### Staff may wish to consider revising forms using adoption-friendly language.

It should be noted that in the United States, once a child is adopted the birth certificate is reissued with the child's name and the name(s) of the forever parent(s). However, some states do not allow families with two moms or two dads who have children who were adopted to list both parents on the birth certificate (because the birth certificate lists *mother* and *father*). And there may also be unmarried heterosexual couples parenting a child who was adopted by only one of the parents.

Because documentation varies, it is important to review the wording used in handbooks, policies, enrollment forms, newsletters, and other written material. Program forms may seem to communicate unwelcoming beliefs or an unfriendly philosophy when instead the staff simply have not looked critically at the forms or have been using the same forms for a number of years. Staff may wish to consider revising forms using adoption-friendly language. If the program defines *family* in the family handbook, it is important

to include people who are parenting a child (and may have been doing so since birth) but who are not legally the child's parents so that their roles in the child's life are honored.

One way to let all families know that they and their children are important is to ask for stories and information about the child and family on the first page of the registration form. Addresses and phone numbers are essential, but so are their stories. The following examples can encourage all families to tell their stories:

*What can you share about your family that will help us to take the best care of your child?* Parents might view this as a place to write about their families and include information about adoption, family make-up, special needs, and so on. Putting this type of question first can give families the impression that what is most important to the staff is getting to know the child and family.

*Who are the important people in your child's life? Will these important people visit the child at the program?* For some children who were adopted, their birth families might be important people in their lives, and this information could be listed here. The program could be a place for the birth family to visit the child, but it is important to note that the forever parents have parental rights and are the only people who can legally allow the birth family visitation at the program or anywhere else (Siegel & Smith 2012). This is also at the discretion of the program staff, as they have the right to determine who can visit the program. If birth families are given permission to visit the child at the center,

it is wise to develop a legally binding contract among the program, the forever family, and the birth family in conjunction with a family lawyer who specializes in adoption-related legal issues.

*We want the program to be a place where you and your child feel welcome. Are there materials, celebrations, special days, or activities that you would like us to incorporate into the setting?* In this section families can request adding books about adoption, pictures of families that reflect the children's families (e.g., multiracial families, single parents, two-mom or two-dad families, or special needs), celebration of National Adoption Month (November), or celebration of Gotcha Day (the day a child's adoption was finalized or the child became part of the family) or Family Day. They may ask for the exclusion of certain activities. For example, a child who was adopted may not have pictures from when he was a baby and may feel left out when asked to bring in such photos. Or he may feel uncomfortable sharing about his family because he does not look like his forever family and does not know much about his birth family.

Health history is important to obtain during registration, but for some children there may be little or no

information prior to adoption. If the program uses a form developed by the staff, a simple way to make the form adoption-friendly is to use open words and phrases, such as *Please complete this health history form with as much information as possible. We understand that there may be situations (adoption) in which families do not have the information.* If the program uses a health form produced by an outside licensing agent, then a statement such as the one above could be printed and stapled to it.

## Environmental changes

Early childhood educators can make classroom changes to create an adoption-friendly environment. One of the easiest ways to do this is to prominently display pictures that reflect families with diverse and nontraditional compositions and families that appear to have been formed through adoption or foster care. Another environmental change is to make materials related to adoption available to families. These can include printing out and posting articles from the Adoptive Families website on a family board or referencing articles in a monthly newsletter. This shows families with children who were adopted that staff are cognizant of issues related to adoption and want to share such information with all families.

## Early childhood educators can make classroom changes to create an adoption-friendly environment.

The materials in a classroom can give children and families a sense of belonging. Early childhood educators understand the importance of high-quality literature for young children. There are numerous picture books with adoption-related themes (Mattix & Crawford 2011) that teachers can include in the literacy center, such as *We Belong Together: A Book About Adoption and Families* (2007), by Todd Parr, and *Tell Me Again About the Night I Was Born* (2000), by Jamie Lee Curtis.

If possible, staff may want to have multiple books about adoption in their classroom. Children can make generalizations when given little information, and if there is only one book about adoption the children might generalize that information to all children who were adopted. An example of this would be a book about a child with brown skin who is adopted by parents with white skin. A child reading this book could generalize that only children with brown skin are adopted.

It is hard to find a book that replicates children's families exactly, so teachers may want to write books with children that reflect their families. This is appropriate for all children, but it may be especially important for children who were adopted.



## Diversity and adoption

The important work of Louise Derman-Sparks and Julie Olsen Edwards (2010) related to anti-bias curriculum is essential reading for early childhood educators and can assist teachers in meeting the needs of children who have been adopted into families that reflect racial and cultural backgrounds different from their parents' backgrounds. There are four goals within the anti-bias curriculum, but the one that connects with the lived experiences of children who were adopted is the first: "each child will demonstrate self-awareness, confidence, family pride, and positive social identities" (4). For children who were adopted—especially into families with different cultural or racial backgrounds—the idea of identity can be multifaceted. A child from Guatemala might identify as Latina (the identity of her birth family) as well as Irish American and Jewish (the identities of her parents). Teachers may find this challenging and need to work with families to best understand and celebrate how children identify themselves and feel pride in their identities.

Some children and families will want to continue to honor and celebrate the child's culture after the adoption process and may ask teachers to include celebrations, traditions, and activities from the birth culture in the classroom. It is important for the staff to talk with families about how and what to include, which can be introduced through open-ended questions on an enrollment form. For example, a family that has adopted a child from China may celebrate Chinese New Year and ask if they can share those traditions with the child's class. A Caucasian family who adopted an African American child may wish to celebrate Kwanzaa with the child's classmates.

To reflect families' various cultures, teachers can add materials such as books about multicultural and multiracial families; puzzles that depict multicultural, multiethnic families; and ethnically and culturally diverse dolls. Program staff may need to purchase numerous play figures that combine to create diverse family sets so that all children can form families that mirror their own.

## Handling tough questions

One of the wonderful aspects of teaching young children is that they have not yet fine-tuned their filters and will often ask questions that adults would be hesitant to ask. However, as it relates to adoption children may ask questions that unintentionally harm a child who was adopted. As noted earlier, there are many more open adoptions now than in the past, and children are much more likely to know they were adopted. In some cases, this is part of the adoption process that the adoptive parents must agree to—informing the child early

## How to Answer Children's Tough Questions

**Q:** *Why didn't your real mom want you?*

**A:** Sonya's birth family made an adoption plan. That means that they knew they wouldn't be able to raise her, so they found another family they trusted to adopt Sonya.

Since most domestic adoptions are open, and many birth families choose the forever family (Siegel & Smith 2012), it would be possible to give more specific information if you know it and the child and family agree with it being shared. For example, you might share that the birth family wanted a family that had already adopted a child, as Sonya's forever family did.

**Q:** *Do you speak Spanish?*

**A:** Sonya was adopted from Mexico as a baby, but Sonya's family speaks English and she is growing up speaking English. Just like everyone else in class, she is learning some Spanish. Are you asking this question because some people you know who have light brown skin like Sonya speak Spanish?

**Q:** *Do you miss your parents?*

**A:** This is a question only Sonya can answer. She has been with her forever parents since she was born, so she might not miss her birth parents but she might wonder about them.

This answer would be different if a child has contact with the birth family or if the child was adopted later in life, such as through the foster care system.

**Q:** *Will you go back to your other family?*

**A:** Adoption is forever. Sonya is with her forever family and that is where she will always stay. She will not be unadopted.

**Q:** *Why don't you look like your parents?*

**A:** Sonya probably looks like her birth parents, but you are right that she looks different from her forever parents. In what ways does she look the same as her forever parents? In what ways do you look the same as or different from your parents?

**Q:** *You can't have two moms.* (Sonya is a child with two moms.)

**A:** Sonya does have two moms. In your family you have a mom and your grandma. In Gabriel's family there is a mom and a dad. In Olivia's family there are two dads. There are many different ways to make a family. Let's go over to our family pictures wall and look at all of the ways.

**Q:** *Are you scared they [birth family] will come and get you?*

**A:** This is a question that only Sonya can answer. I would guess that, like most children, there are things that scare Sonya. But I know that Sonya's birth family and her forever family both want her to feel safe, loved, and not scared, so I think they try not to do anything to scare her.



the concrete, self-centered thinking of a child (*Why did they give you up?* and *Can my family give me up?*) rather than the perspective of adults (*We were lucky we all found each other*).

Sonya capably answered the questions that her classmates asked, but some children may not have information related to their adoption, or they may not want to talk about adoption, or their personalities may preclude them from sharing much information. It is important for teachers to help by answering questions about adoption to the best of their abilities without sharing children's or families' personal information or dismissing the questions as inappropriate. The questions will vary depending on children's ages, but to prepare generally, the teacher can ask the child and family at the time of enrollment how they want the teacher to respond. On page 21

about being adopted and continuing to discuss adoption throughout the child's life. So a child may enter a classroom knowing she was adopted and share that information during play in the dramatic play area or at group time through a "Me Poster."

**Four-year-old Sonya is very interested in everything related to her birth family, and her forever family discusses adoption almost daily. Sonya's parents read every article they can about adoption, but one has been particularly helpful. It discusses sharing information related to their child's history and birth family with people inside and outside the family. The message is simple—this is your child's story to tell (Cuchens, n.d.). Sonya's parents share information with Sonya as it seems appropriate, and they follow Sonya's lead in how much information to share with others.**

**During sharing time at preschool one day, Sonya explains that she wants her friends to know about her birth family and adoption. Much to the surprise of her teacher, Sonya shares everything she knows about her adoption (some of which the teacher doesn't know) and then asks whether her classmates have any questions.**

A child's self-disclosure may result in classmates asking questions. Those questions, coming from unfiltered, curious children, may be ones that the child needs support to answer. Ideally the child can answer the questions, but the teacher may wish to prepare for unfiltered questions from

are the questions that the children asked Sonya, along with responses that a teacher could give if a child prefers to have the teacher respond. (The first step is to ask the child who was adopted if it is okay to answer the questions.)

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## Conclusion

It is important for early childhood educators to be aware of the issues that face families formed through adoption. Teachers can respond by making changes in their programs that help welcome these families as engaged partners. However, the most important way early childhood educators can engage families with children who were adopted is through open and thoughtful communication—asking for information in thoughtful ways, incorporating materials in the classroom that reflect the families, using adoption-friendly language, being prepared for questions children may ask, and sharing with the families questions or comments that come up in the classroom. Early childhood teachers play an important role in the early years of every child's life, but for a child who was adopted and for the child's family, the support from the teacher can be invaluable.

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