

TAGS: Specific Adoption Types; Kinship Adoption

Unique Issues with Step-parent Adoption

Step-parent adoption is the most common type of adoption in the US. In fact, over 100,000 children are adopted by their step-parent each year. For something so common, it's surprising that there are so few resources for helping parents navigate some of the unique issues in step-parent adoptions.

While step-parent adoptions have a lot in common with traditional adoptions (where neither parent is genetically related to the child) there are some major differences that raise some unique challenges.

Downplaying "Adoption"

Many parents in families formed through step-parent adoption tend to downplay the adoption aspect of how their family was formed. After all, one parent who is genetically connected is raising the child, right? This parent can easily answer any questions the child has about "where they come from," right? The child's birth parent is not involved and can be easily replaced by the person who is willing to step up and be a real parent, right? Well... yes and no.

It's true that one genetic parent will raise the child and this parent can answer some of the child's questions, especially those questions about the child's early life and that parent's side of the family. It's also true that usually the step-parent who is adopting is well known by the child and is already functioning in the role of parent. However, on another level, this form of adoption also brings with it some of the identity and loyalty issues common to all types of adoption. The difference is that parents in traditional adoptions are (hopefully) prepared (by a social worker, pre-adoptive training, etc.) for these issues. Parents in step-parent adoptions are very often not intentionally prepared.

Who is the Newcomer?

In traditional adoption, the existing family unit is usually comprised of the parents and/or biological children with the adopted child being the newcomer to the family. In step-parent adoption, the existing family unit is the parent and child(ren) with the *interloper* being the step-parent. Neither way is inherently good or bad, but it helps to realize this dynamic at the beginning.

Step-parent adoptions usually involve the blending of two firmly established family cultures. This can be beautiful or messy. Truthfully, it's usually a bit of both. Successful blending requires lots of talking amongst all members of the family and flexibility on the part of both parents. If the children are old enough, it is helpful to start the tradition of a weekly family meeting. Also, don't forget the importance of one-on-one time between the genetic parent and the child.

Talking about the Birth Parent

We stress the importance of talking about birth parents in traditional adoption because we know that children have questions and often struggle with a sense of divided loyalty. They may be afraid to talk about their birth parents without encouragement. This encouragement to talk about the other parent often does not happen in step-parent adoptions.

Usually in step-parent adoptions, the birth parent has not been active in the child's life prior to the adoption. Many parents view the adoption as replacing this absent parent: delete one absentee father/mother, replace with a present one, and voilà a new family is born.

As parents, we may want to believe that our new family unit will be enough, that we are providing our child with two parents, so they will not think about the parent that "was replaced." This is seldom the case. Most children think about and have questions about their birth parent much like kids do in a traditional adoption experience. Their questions will sound like this:

- ~ Why was he uninvolved?
- ~ Why did she leave?
- ~ What was he like as a kid?
- ~ Do I have half-siblings?
- ~ Does she miss me?

They have these questions even if they are not sharing them with you. Do your child a favor and give permission to wonder out loud about the birth parent. As the parent, it is up to you to bring up the subject because most children have an innate sense of what topics we want to avoid. Try these conversation starters, for example:

"Hey, do you have any questions about your dad/John/birth father/first dad? You can always ask me."

"When I see you play soccer/piano, I think you may have gotten some of your talents from your dad/John/birth father/first dad. He was really good at that, too."

Negative Feelings about Your Child's Birth Parent

A significant difference between step-parent adoption and traditional adoption is that in step-parent adoption, the parent that has custody and is promoting the adoption had a prior relationship with the birth parent. Chances are very good that this relationship is fraught with a lot of negative feelings. This adds a challenge that is often missing from more traditional adoptions.

One of the hardest parts of parenting is putting our kids' needs first. It's all fine and good to say it in theory, but oh boy, it's hard when their needs do not align well with our own. Parents in families formed through step-parent adoption are in just such a position.

Most children want to think positively about their parents. They want to love them and be loved back, even if the parent has been absent, or is a lousy spouse/partner, or is a jerk, or is an addict or.... fill in that blank. By age 10 or so children also begin to understand that half of their genes come from this person and that some of their traits, personality, strengths, and weaknesses come from this person. If their parents believe that this person is a jerk/irresponsible/awful, what does this say about the child who is carrying half of his/her genes?

While you don't have to gloss over the reasons why this parent relinquished his/her parental rights, it's important to also share some of the positives about them. At one point you very likely found them appealing enough to create a child, so harken back to those times and remember what attracted you.

Contact with Birth Parent or Birth Grandparents

Traditional adoptions encourage some degree of openness between the adoptive family and the birth family because research has shown that this is good for children. Openness can take on many forms, but the general idea is that it is best for the child to not erase the existence of the family that gave birth to them. The same holds true for step-parent adoption.

Openness can range anywhere from sending pictures and emails to FaceTime or Skype calls to in-person visits. If it is not possible or advisable to maintain contact with the birth parent, you need to consider if it would be possible to have some openness with your child's extended family. Would the child's birth grandparents like to still be considered as grandparents and maintain a relationship? Any type of contact would facilitate the child being able to ask questions and learn about this side of her genetic history.

For some additional reading on the importance of navigating extended family relationships, though it's not specific to step-parent adoption, we recommend [Holidays with Extended Family: An Opportunity for Connection by C.A.S.E.](#)

[Creating a Family has a radio interview, Step-Parent Adoption](#), with our own Will Waller, Program Director at Jockey Being Family Foundation as one of the guest experts.