



## Adoption as an Extended Family Network

You've made the decision to adopt. You've discussed it with a few close friends and family members as you've been pondering it, but now you're ready to share it with your larger circle. Any new child, whether biological or foster, is sure to affect family dynamics. Fortunately, these changes can be largely positive if you educate your family about the process and their role in this new experience.

When approaching the conversation about becoming an adoptive family, you want your extended friends and family network to feel the same excitement that you have. People outside of your immediate family may not know how to react, especially if you have experienced infertility or grief on the path to adoption. These feelings are valid, but they should not become barriers to sharing the news.

Possible concerns from the extended family may include:

- They are nervous about the adoption and the impact it may have on the family.
- They might be concerned about the biological family tree.
- They didn't decide to adopt, but adoption is now part of their family.

Explain that building relationships slowly, at the child's pace, will help the child feel safe and respected. Reassure your loved ones that families who adopt through the foster care system may seem to be creating a layer of complexity regarding family dynamics on the surface, but underneath it all, family is family.

### Tips for Sharing and Explaining the Decision to Adopt

**Open and Honest Communication:** To begin with, share your adoption plans, hopes, and expectations. Additionally, discuss any concerns or fears you may have and ask about what they may worry about in return. If they have questions or concerns, address them with empathy and understanding.

**Educate and Inform:** Help your extended family understand the complexities of adoption by providing them with educational resources and information. For instance, explain the different types of adoption, the legal process involved, and the emotional journey that adoptive parents and children may go through. Consider sharing our information packet, *Adopting From Foster Care (Public Adoption) Information*, as a way for them to access answers to questions they may not even know to ask.

**During the Home Study Process:** Parents may choose to include family members and

friends in the home study process. This can be a stressful and confusing period. Providing factual information about agency procedures and home visits can take the mystery out of it. Oftentimes, the wait is difficult for future grandparents, aunts, uncles, and friends, too. They are feeling the same excitement, impatience, and hope as you!

**Inclusion and Acceptance:** Discuss the expectation early on that family members are to treat the adopted child no differently from biological children. They will be included in family activities, traditions, and celebrations. The sense of belonging created will support the child's integration into the family at a pace the adoptive parents are comfortable with. **The Need for Trusted Caregivers:** Let them know that while there will be a period of adjustment as the immediate family's relationship with the child develops, you will need trusted friends and family members who can care for the child when you need a break, just like any other parent. The most important role they can play is to provide ongoing support to both the parents and the child.

### **Involving Friends and Family When the Child is in the Home**

Involving family members and friends in the adoption process and the child's homecoming can be tricky, but it is important for clear communication and setting boundaries. Loved ones may report feeling disconnected from the onset of the adoption process and even carry fears that the child will not form an attachment to them.

Extended family may propose many invitations and celebrations during this "nesting" period. In most cases, it's best to decline these invitations for the time being. To the extended circle of family and friends, this can be painful. They may be disappointed, and this could even cause conflict with extended family members. Reassure them that this period is not forever. As your family adjusts to being together, you will slowly move towards a more active social calendar.

**Boundaries and Privacy:** Since adoption is a personal and sensitive topic, it is up to the adoptive parents to decide how much background information they want to share with extended family members and others. Ensure that everyone understands and respects these boundaries in order to protect the child's privacy and emotional well-being.

**Respect the Transitional Stage:** Following a child's arrival home, it is important for the parent's community to acknowledge and respect the transitional stage of adoption. The earliest days after parents bring their new child home are critical for establishing bonding and trust between parents and a new child. During these first few months, adoptive parents should be the primary ones meeting their child's needs. This teaches the child that their parents will be there for them and builds a foundation of trust.

Practicing this may be tough for some loved ones, who want to be more intimately involved. This doesn't mean family and friends must stay away altogether. Explain that slowly introducing important people will help the child become familiar with new faces and learn what role they play in your life. They may be meeting new cousins, aunts, uncles, and grandparents, as well as family friends. That is a lot to take in and can be overwhelming at first.

**How They Can Help:** Extended family and friends can help in other practical ways, such as dropping off meals, offering to carpool or take care of other children in the home, cleaning, or simply asking the adoptive parents what would be most helpful to them. Helping in this way to provide uninterrupted bonding time between a parent and child is an incredible gift.

### **A Different Type of Parenting: Facilitating Attachment**

In simplest terms, adoptive parents may seem strict. They stick to rigid schedules and attempt to not deviate from plans. Plans are made well in advance and are communicated often. Unfortunately, adoptive families may be criticized for their parenting styles, especially when extended family or friends feel you are being too rigid or structured. This may come from a general lack of understanding of child development or not understanding the effects of childhood trauma. Many adoptive children have emotional and behavioral difficulties due to their history of adversity. Adoptive parents help their children develop healthy brain patterns through nurturing environments and loving relationships.

Children who are adopted from foster care often need a more intense style of parenting that may appear to be unnecessarily strict by people outside of the immediate family circle. You can share with friends and family what that parenting might look like and why it is needed. Here are some points to discuss:

**Consistent Presence:** Being physically and emotionally present with your child consistently is critical. This presence fosters a sense of safety, which is essential for healthy brain development. Explain that you may not be able to answer every text or phone call immediately if you are with your child. Being emotionally present means being mentally available and making eye contact when the child addresses you.

**Attuned Communication:** You will pay close attention to your child's emotional and nonverbal cues to develop a secure attachment. For example, at a family gathering, you may need to check in on your child often or have them in your line of sight. If the child appears too stimulated, you may need to leave early or find a quiet place to spend time apart from others.

**High Nurture, High Structure:** Children who have experienced trauma need structure in their daily lives and intense nurturing. Nurture provides the emotional warmth and security they crave, while structure helps them feel safe and know what to expect. This combination helps rewire the brain for trust and emotional regulation. You may be judged for coddling or spoiling your child with your attention. This would be a good time to explain how a child who has experienced trauma may have an emotional age much younger than their biological age.

### **Expanding Your Circle with Biological Family of Child**

In an open adoption, there is some level of ongoing contact and communication between the adoptive family, the birth parents, and, potentially, other members of the birth family. This type of connection can send a powerful message to the child about the many people who love them. The type of contact and communication needs to be mutually agreed upon by both families.

The adoptive family and birth family may choose to establish and maintain relationships that extend beyond the child's immediate biological parents. This can involve regular visits, phone calls, and the exchange of letters or emails with an extended family network that may include the child's grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, and siblings.

Cultivating and maintaining the extended biological family network can provide adopted children with a broader support system while providing a deeper understanding of their heritage and genetic background. In addition, forming connections with their biological relatives provides opportunities to exchange important information, such as medical history and cultural traditions.

It's important to note that the level of openness and involvement of the extended family network may vary depending on the specific circumstances and preferences of everyone involved. Adoption arrangements are unique and can be tailored to meet everyone's needs and comfort levels, with the child's best interests as the main focus.

### **Connection is Invaluable**

There will be days when navigating family dynamics or past connections feels heavy, but the reward is a child who grows up to learn that love is expansive. If you find it challenging to navigate the complexities of adoption and extended family, consider seeking support from adoption professionals, therapists, or support groups. These resources can provide guidance, insights, and a safe space to discuss any concerns or challenges.



# Resources

- [The Adoption Decision: 15 Things You Want to Know Before Adopting](#)
- [Holiday Plan of Action Checklist Handout](#)
- [Mental Health Resources](#)
- [Virtual Support Groups](#)
- [Adoption: An Extended Family Network](#)
- [The Role of Extended Family in Adoption](#)