



# Adoption

By Gabriella van Rij

## A Gift That Gives Both Ways

### Advice for Parents Considering Adoption



**T**o all parents who are considering adoption, or have adopted children, I as an adoptee applaud you. I was adopted from a Pakistani orphanage at the age of 3 and raised in a Dutch diplomat's family in Holland at a time when multicultural adoptions were unheard of.

I am whole heartedly for adoption, but also know personally the struggles that come along with it. Wanting a child is often a desire to fill a void in a couple's lives. Before you move forward with adoption, put yourself in the shoes of your future child and — for a moment — look away from your own expectations.

A child often has no say whatsoever in this life-changing event. One day the child finds him or herself in a new family and must learn how to cope. Having biological children is already a huge task, but taking on adopted children, especially those from a different ethnic or cultural background, is even a greater endeavor — particularly when the adopted child is not an infant.

With preparation, you can successfully navigate through a torrent of emotions that go through the mind of the adoptee, particularly in the case of a multi-cultural adoption.

Here are a few observations garnered from my own experiences throughout the years

that could be useful for future parents of an adopted child:

1. Remember that expectations toward the unknown child are unrealistic as there is not yet a bond between the two of you. Take your time to bond. There are NO rules. Just take your time.
2. Encourage open dialogue on any subject that comes up with your adopted child, especially when biological children are already in the family.
3. Never lie regarding a child's origins, no matter how difficult the truth might be in your eyes. The child prefers to hear the truth. If the child was adopted when older, he or she already understands abandonment. It is the adopted parent who has a harder time with talking about the child's history.
4. A question that is often asked by adopted children that they do not dare to ask their parents, but which I am asked when I give talks at school assemblies is: When I was born did my biological mother give me a name? It is a valid question. It is one that holds a lot of emotion because, if true, then why did the adoptive parents change the child's name? If not true and they were not given a name, they will wonder why the biological mother did not care to name their child. Even though this is an emotional minefield, it is still better to answer as truthfully as you can to help your child grow and move forward in his or her journey.
5. Never tell an adoptee, "You are different and special and that is why I chose you." I have not met one adoptee who actually liked hearing that. Yes, they will repeat this because it is their only ammunition they've been given against questions, but like all children, they just want to belong and fit in their environment, especially at school. Today, in our increasingly multi-cultural world, it is easier for children of different ethnicities to blend in, but make no mistake — they often still get bullied for their differences.

6. Don't tell your child who comes home with bad math grades that this never happens in your family, or that you were never bad at math. It will set your child apart, as he or she knows these talents were not inherited from you.
7. Do not try to convince your adopted child that he or she is the same as your biological

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- cal children because he or she knows better!
8. Abandonment is an issue that they will deal with for the rest of their lives. Don't try to convince them otherwise; instead, help them deal with that void.
9. Racism is sometimes an ugly word. Adopted or not, I see it everywhere when I speak with children during my assemblies. And not only with multi-cultural adopted children, mind you; there are a lot of mixed-race kids out there with the same problem an adoptee has. It is important to keep the dialogue open as the child will not easily confide in you on issues of race, as he or she knows you cannot relate. Let him or her know that you will listen instead.
10. As a parent, do not get scared when your child, during his or her teenage years, wants to find his or her biological parents. It is a normal process for the adoptee to search for his or her own identity and sense of belonging. Be prepared to help and don't be intimidated; it takes nothing away from your relationship with them.

In closing, I would like share a short paragraph from my recent book "With All My Might:"

I had felt alone most of my life and had never been able to compare myself to anyone else. Mothers and daughters, fathers and sons resemble each other physically, and I had absolutely never had any comparison to

the kind of connection that goes with resemblance. People who have family tell me it is unimportant that they look like their aunt or grandmother. But resemblance to a family member is something adopted children crave. It gives us a sense of normalcy, of belonging to someone.

Remember, your future adopted child craves belonging — as do we all. If you navigate the various issues that come with adoption with courage, sensitivity and kindness, you will be doing your part to make your new structured family a place for your child to belong and thrive.

*The leading voice of the Kindness movement, Gabriella van Rij works to spread the message that we are all unique and we each have something to offer the person next to us. She has a non-profit 501(c)(3) foundation in the United States. She is the author of "I Can Find My Might," a part self-help, part practical resource for students, parents and educators on bullying and self-acceptance. She is also the author of "With All My Might," a memoir about cross-cultural adoptions. For more information about van Rij and her books, visit <http://gabriella.global/author>.*