

Bill Spring - Writing Sample

Guide to Adoption, written for the pre-teen audience of the PBS Kids website “It’s My Life”

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It’s Part of Our Lives

What do you think of when you hear the word “adoption”? Does it bring up the face of someone you know, possibly even someone in your family...or in the mirror? Does it bring up scenes from books, TV, movies, and news stories?

Adoption has so many sides to it, and has touched so many people’s lives. It’s become a huge part of family life these days. In 2001, there were 1.5 million adopted children in the United States; by the time the results of the 2010 census are reviewed, that number could be 2 million or more!

Many of you have written to us about your experiences:

“I’m adopted from China and my little sis was adopted from China too!” says **Claire, 10**. “She is 6 years old and sometimes very annoying...she always wants me to play with her. I have friends that are adopted from China as well. No one else in my family is adopted, not even on my Mom’s or Dad’s side. I’m glad to be adopted because who knows what life would be like back in China.”

Jamie, 12, tells us: “I was adopted when I was four years old. When I was young I got passed around to foster parents and there were a lot. My older sister was also adopted. But the horrible thing is we got adopted to separate families! We still get to see each other like once a year though!”

“I am adopted,” says **Caroline, 13**. “I don’t really mind it, but one time at camp this little 8 year old girl walked up to me and said, “Are you adopted?” I didn’t want to lie so I just said, ‘Yes.’ Then she said, ‘Oh, I wouldn’t want to be adopted because then that means

my parents don't love me.' I didn't take it too personally because she was only 8 but yeah. A lot of people at that camp thought I was different because of that.”

“My mom and my dad are in the process of adopting. They said it can take months or even years. I am so excited to get a brother or a sister that I can teach stuff to,” says **Shalonda, 12.**

Kaitlyn has a heartwrenching story: “I was put into foster care when I was an infant because my mother abandoned me. When I was with her all I knew was my baby swing, a bottle, and a dirty diaper. She never held me and she didn't care about me. I know all about this because my parents now have told me all about it, and they know because she told them. I went through 5 different foster homes because nobody wanted me. When I was 15 months old, I was put into a family that wanted me. My parents now love me and care for me, and they help me through my difficult decisions. I thank God every day for my parents. Someday I hope to adopt a little girl or boy.”

Margaret writes, “I was born in South Korea with a birth defect called a cleft-lip and palate. My birth parents loved me very much but couldn't afford to take care of me. A family in America who badly wanted children and weren't able to have any but were willing to adopt, saw the chance to adopt me and took it. It was very hard for my birth parents to give me up but since they loved me soooooo much and knew that it was the best thing for me they put me up for adoption. And now, thanks to them, I'm living with my way cool family and my way cool friends in a way cool country!”

“I was adopted when I was just a little baby,” says **Kelly, 11.** “My foster parents didn't tell me until I was 10. The reason my birth parents gave me up...well, they were too young and couldn't raise me. It really doesn't matter much to me. I'm happy with my life, and I have very nice foster siblings, so I'm fine!”

Madi, 13 told us: “My friend is adopted. She was just staying in foster care with her family when I met her. I remember when she was officially adopted we all had a huge party!”

If you don't personally know someone with an adoption story, maybe you know *these* famous people who are adoptees (meaning they were adopted): Apple Computer founder Steve Jobs, former First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt, country music stars Faith Hill and Tim McGraw, John Lennon of The Beatles, and former President Bill Clinton.

In this IML topic, you'll learn more about the different types of adoption and what it means to parents, children, and families in general, starting with **The Basics**.

Our thanks to Nicole Falcone, MSW, LSW, school social worker for her help with this topic!

The Basics

What is adoption?

Adoption is when a child's "birth parents" or "biological parents" transfer the rights and responsibilities of parenting a child over to another parent or parents. The child then legally becomes part of the adoptive parents' family.

What are the types of adoption?

Domestic adoption is when parents choose to adopt a child in their own country.

International adoption is adopting a child, usually a baby or toddler, from another country. Often, but not always, people choose to adopt from countries that are poor, troubled by war, or where there are many, many children in need of care. In the U.S., parents often choose to adopt from places like China, Korea, India, and countries in Eastern Europe and Central America.

Open adoption is a relatively new way to adopt a child where the birth parents and adoptive parents agree to stay in touch after the adoption. The adoptive parents raise the child, but allow the birth mother or parents to be a part of the child's life through regular visits, letters and photos, or other forms of contact.

Closed adoption is the more common form. Birth parents give up all rights to the child, who then grows up only knowing his or her adoptive parents. Information about the child's birth parents is "sealed," and usually not even the adoptive parents know these details. Sometimes important information, like a birth parent's medical history, is given to the adoptive family so they have it if they need it.

Semi-open adoption is when the birth parents and the adoptive parents agree to have some contact or exchange just a little information. Often they never meet face to face, but instead use a "middle man" such as the agency that handled the adoption.

Foster care adoption is when a family decides to adopt a child that they (or another family) have cared for as part of a state or national foster care program. Sometimes the child is a baby, but more likely he or she is an older kid. For more about this, see our page on **Foster Families**.

Stepfamily adoption usually occurs when a child's mother or father gets remarried, and their new stepparent decides to become a legal parent by adopting. You can read more about **Stepfamilies** on IML.

Why do people choose to put a child up for adoption?

Money issues. A mother, or a mom and dad together, may not feel they like they have the financial resources needed to raise a child, or may want their baby to grow up outside of the poverty they live in. In some cases, babies are born with medical conditions that the birth parents can't afford to treat.

Single moms. Many pregnant women and moms are faced with raising a child by themselves. They may be widows, or divorced, or simply unmarried, and they decide they can't do it alone.

Age. When a woman becomes pregnant very young, she may feel that she is not ready to be a parent, and that her baby will be better off being raised by an older couple.

Whatever the specific reason, most birth parents choose adoption as an option because they want their child to have the best possible life -- and know they are unable to provide that.

Why do people choose to adopt?

Infertility. Sometimes, a couple very much wants to start a family but finds out that for some medical reason, they're not able to have children of their own. This is the number one reason why people adopt, making up more than two thirds of adoptions worldwide.

To create a new type of family. Many people are able to have children, but choose to start a family without having kids themselves. Often a single woman will want a baby, so she chooses to adopt. Sometimes families have one or more biological children, and then decide to expand their family by adopting.

Because there are kids who need it. One of the best reasons to adopt a baby or child is simply because there are so many kids who need safe homes and loving families. Parents feel the need to help these kids and give them the love they deserve.

Population concerns. Many adults want to start a family or add to their family, but worry that there are already so many people in the world. Rather than add new people to the count, they choose to adopt kids who have already been born and need someone to raise and love them.

So those are the basics. Now, do you know what's **True or False?** when it comes to adoption?

True or False?

There's a lot of common "beliefs" about adoption, and you may have heard some of them. Can you tell what's fact from what's fiction?

"Adoptive parents aren't *real* parents."

This is **false**. In every way, adoptive parents are real parents. Legally, financially, emotionally...they are really, truly a child's parents as soon as they adopt a child and decide to love and care for her or him. Family is family, even if the family members don't share the same genes.

"Parents love adopted kids as if they were their own children."

This is **true**! Adoptive parents will tell you that it doesn't matter whose body their children come from. They love them, period.

"Adopted kids are unwanted kids."

This is **false**. Birth parents often have many complicated reasons for choosing to give a child up for adoption, but adoptive parents decide to adopt because they have a powerful wish to. To adopt a child is to *choose* that child, and to *want* that child. Adopted kids are every bit as wanted as other kids.

"Adopted children should never know anything about their birth parents."

This is **false**. Even in closed adoptions, kids can sometimes learn information about their birth parents when they are old enough to seek it out. Often, they can send letters and photos to their birth parents, who can choose to read them or not.

"Adopted kids get into more trouble, and are less well-adjusted than other kids."

This is **false**. There are a lot of reasons why one child may get into more "trouble" and have "problems" than another, but being adopted isn't necessarily one of them.

"The birth mothers of adopted kids are all teenagers or drug-users."

This is **false**. Actually, the majority of moms who give up their children for adoption are healthy women in their twenties.

"Adoption is forever."

This is **true**. In almost all cases, adoption is not a temporary situation, but a permanent one. Once you're part of a family, you're there for good!

Next up: The Search For Identity.

The Search for Identity

“Who am I?”

Everybody asks this question at some point... usually when we're tweens or teens, when we're leaving childhood behind and growing up. Life is a journey of self-discovery, and being adopted can make this journey more complicated. Among the things adopted people often wonder about are:

- What part of my personality comes from my adoptive family, and what part comes from my birth parents?
- Who are my birth parents? What do they look like, and where do they live?
- Why did they put me up for adoption?
- What would my life have been like if I hadn't been adopted?
- Do I have brothers or sisters I don't know about?

When young people feel they want to know more about where they came from, it can sometimes lead to a sticky situation with their adoptive parents. They might feel like they're being disloyal to the parents who've raised and loved them, and parents can sometimes feel awkward because they don't have more information to offer, or because they worry that their child is hurting, unhappy, or somehow feeling incomplete. Here's the best advice we can offer for kids in that department:

Be open and be honest. Sit down with your parents and tell them, as best as you can, exactly what you're feeling. Chances are, they knew this day was coming and have thought a lot about it. They're probably pretty confident that you see them as your “real” parents, and totally understand your need to know more about your birth parents. You may worry about hurt feelings, but it's when people hide the truth that feelings really get hurt.

Ask them all the questions you have. They may not have all the answers, but they might be able to help you find them, or get you started. It's important for them to know what you want to know.

Listen when they talk. Encourage your parents to be totally honest about their own feelings...even their worries and fears. They may think you're too young to know absolutely everything about your adoption story, and may encourage you to wait a little while. They may be happy to answer some of your questions (if they know the answers) and ask you to wait for the answers to others. The important thing is for you, and them, to say what you feel and stay honest.

Remember that you're not alone. No matter what, you are part of a family. Your parents adopted you because they want you, and that will not change because you want to know more about your birth. Your adoptive parents have been beside you for all the steps in your life journey, and this should be no exception. There may be times when you want to be alone, and that's okay. But your family can be with you in spirit even at these times.

On the next page we talk about **Foster Families**.

Foster Families

One important topic that's related to adoption is foster care, or foster families. Here's what you need to know:

What is foster care?

Foster care is a system, usually run by the state, that places infants, children, and teens in the temporary care of parents and families who are willing and able to give them a home. In many places around the world, foster care or "home care" programs are an alternative to the traditional system of orphanages and children's homes.

In the United States in 2009, over 450,000 kids were in foster care. 55,000 were adopted...and 123,000 were waiting to be adopted. The average age of foster kids was 9 years old.

Who are foster care kids?

These are children and teens who, for one reason or another, aren't able to live with their birth parents. Their parents may have died, or been judged "unfit" for neglecting or abusing their children. In many cases, foster kids are waiting to be adopted but have not been yet been placed with permanent adoptive parents.

Who are foster care parents?

A foster parent is any adult who is able and willing to provide a stable, caring, and safe home to a kid who needs it. The best foster parents are those who truly love caring for kids, know how to put a child's welfare first, and understand how to make the most out of a family situation that may not be perfect. Foster parents must usually meet specific requirements of the state (a clean, safe home, etc.), usually visit with foster care workers to check on progress, and are sometimes paid money to help support the kids they care for.

What's the goal of foster care?

Foster care has three goals:

- **To reunite children with their birth parents.** If their parents are still living and are judged to be once again fit to care for their children, the system works towards this goal. In some cases, children are reunited with relatives, like an aunt or uncle, after being in a foster care family.
- **Permanent adoption.** Often, foster parents will adopt a child they're caring for through a "foster/adopt" program. In other cases, foster parents provide care and nurturing for a child until the right adoptive parents come along.
- **Care until Independence.** This relates mostly to older teenagers who are getting close to the age of 18 and have not been adopted. In cases like this, foster care

tries to provide the care and resources needed until a person is old enough to live on her own and take care of herself.

No foster care system is perfect, and sadly, there will always be kids who “fall through the cracks” and end up in bad situations. But foster families answer an urgent need: there are thousands of kids and teens who don’t have responsible parents, and they need care *right now*. Foster families provide this care until someone else can, and they’re an incredibly important part of the system! We’d actually like to give them a big hand!

We can’t be a foster family, but otherwise how can I help kids who are in foster care?

- Many foster care agencies and homes need school supplies, shoes, clothes, or even toys. Collect stuff from your own family or organize a bigger drive through neighbors, school, or church. Suitcases or bags of any kind are often needed because many children go from home to home with their belongings in trash bags! Contact your local agency to see what would be most appreciated.
- Take part in “Walk Me Home,” a nationwide fundraising event that benefits foster care. See if there’s a walk scheduled in your area, or start one.

[www.walkmehome.org]

On the next page, we look at how adoption can be **Something To Celebrate!**

Something to Celebrate!

There was a time not so very long ago when many people thought adoption was something to keep hidden, or to talk about only in whispers. Fortunately these days, most people know the truth: adoption is a wonderful and special way to create families. That's cause for celebration!

If you're adopted, or if a family member or friend is adopted, or even if you just want to know more about adoption, check this out:

Celebrate National Adoption Day

In the U.S., National Adoption Day has been celebrated every November, on the Saturday before Thanksgiving, since 2000. Courts, agencies, and families work together to finalize adoptions of foster care kids on this day, and to celebrate the love that inspires families to adopt. So far, more than 24,000 kids have been adopted from foster care on National Adoption Day! We hope that number keeps growing.

[www.nationaladoptionday.org]

Celebrate your "Gotcha Day"

We're all used to celebrating our birthdays, but if you're adopted, you may have a second cool day to celebrate: your Gotcha Day! This is the day that marks when you became a part of your new family. Not all families use the word "gotcha," but the meaning is the same: this is the special day that the parents "got" a new child, and the child "got" a new family. It's much like a birthday, because it's the anniversary of when a new family was born! You might choose to celebrate your gotcha day with cake, presents, and all that...or invent all new traditions of your own.

Connect with other adopted kids

In past years, many adopted kids may have felt like oddballs in their community simply because they didn't know anyone else who was adopted, and felt like nobody could understand exactly how they felt if they needed someone to talk to. Nowadays, it's much easier to connect with other kids in adoptive families, finding support and just plain friendship with people who will probably "get" one another. **Adoption camps** offer summer fun with other adopted kids, especially those from foreign countries (and sometimes parents too). **Adoption support groups** are another great way to find help, friends, or just someone to talk to.

Here are some resources to get you started:

Adoptive Families Web site and Magazine
<http://adoptivefamilies.com>

Summer Camp Guide from Adoption.com
<http://camps.adoption.com/>

TV and movies as a way to think about and celebrate adoption

Adoption can involve some complicated issues -- some positive and some not so much -- so it's only natural that it often appears as a theme in literature and entertainment. Not all TV shows and movies offer an accurate view of adoption, but here are some we recommend:

On TV:

"Life Unexpected" on the CW Network

Fifteen-year-old Lux has been in the foster care system her whole life and has decided to become an emancipated minor. Her efforts lead Lux to her biological father, who lives like an aging frat-boy and is astonished to learn he has a daughter, and her birth mother, a local radio star. When a judge grants temporary custody of Lux to her parents, they agree to make a belated attempt to give their daughter the family she deserves.

"Find My Family" on ABC

This reality series tells the stories of adoptees searching for and reuniting with their birth parents.

On DVD:

"Arthur: Big Brother Binky"

In this special Arthur episode, Binky's family adopts a baby girl from China. While Binky loves helping prepare for her arrival and visiting China, he worries about how his life will change, and more importantly, whether his new sister will even like him!

"Juno"

When smart, cynical teenager Juno finds out she's pregnant, she finds a couple to adopt her baby and becomes drawn into their lives. This movie was rated PG-13 and may be a bit mature for younger tweens, but it's funny and has lots of heart to it (and also an awesome soundtrack).

"I Am Sam"

Sam Dawson and his daughter Lucy have a great life together until Lucy, at age 7, starts to surpass her mentally challenged father in intelligence. A social worker, believing she's doing the right thing, places Lucy in foster care and Sam must fight to keep custody of his little girl.

"Snow Dogs"

Miami dentist Ted Brooks has no idea he was adopted until he discovers that his birth mom has recently died and left him her estate - in Alaska! Fun follows as Dr. Brooks makes his way to the icy state, learns to deal with the elements, and discovers what he has inherited (the title gives you a clue).

"Heidi"

This one's a classic! Orphaned Heidi is sent to live with a grumpy grandfather, who ignores her at first but as time goes on, the two develop a wonderful and loving bond.

“Anne of Green Gables”

There are several screen versions of this classic book available. It tells the story of Anne Shirley, an imaginative and headstrong orphan. When brother and sister Marilla and Mathew Cuthbert decide to adopt an orphan boy to help Matthew work the farm, they're astonished when Anne arrives at the train station by mistake.

Next, let's read two real life adoption tales, starting with **Christopher's Story**!

Christopher's Story

Christopher is 8 years old and lives in Illinois. His parents, Allan and Toni, already had a nearly three-year-old daughter, Kali, when they decided they wanted to expand their family through adoption. They felt that having one biological child and one adopted child would give them a more rounded experience as parents.

Allan, Toni, and Kali were living in California at the time, and decided to get involved in the state's "Fost-Adopt" program, which lets families take in foster children with the goal of eventually adopting them. The program worked very well for Chris's parents, letting them skip a lot of the red tape and high cost of traditional adoption. They told the program that they were interested in adopting a Latino child (they are white), and, if possible, an infant. Then they waited.

It had been almost three years since Kali was born, when "waiting" meant dealing with pregnancy, going into labor, and all the other things expectant parents do when a baby's on the way. This time, it was very different: they were waiting for the phone to ring. When it finally did, they rushed to the hospital to meet the new member of their family!

Chris: "They brought me home the day after I was born in 2001. I came in a car, and I came back home...and then I started to be in this family."

His sister, who is now 11, remembers it like this:

Kali: "I seem to remember the social worker holding me up to the window in the hospital when my parents were there. I thought, "Cool! I'm gonna have someone to pick on!" I think my parents gave me a very brief talk, telling me a little bit about what this was about. I was about to get a baby brother...he wasn't gonna be the same as me...he was gonna be a little different. Then after that, I just gradually grew to understand that he was going to be my little brother, and I was going to have to treat him like one, too."

Christopher's biological mom wanted a "clean break," so the adoption was closed, meaning that she would not have a role in her baby's life or a relationship with his adoptive family. Christopher's family knows very little about his birth mom, aside from the fact that she was young, had good health care while pregnant, and was originally from El Salvador.

Even though Chris was legally Allan and Toni's foster child for the first year, there was never any doubt that they would adopt him, and from day one, he was a member of the family. When the year passed and they were finally able to make it official, they moved to a new home in Illinois. While from day one Allan and Toni saw Christopher as their true child just like they did with Kali, they also knew they would never attempt to hide the fact that Chris was adopted. Whatever questions Chris or Kali had, their parents would do their best to answer them honestly.

For Chris, understanding where he came from was gradual. As he grew up, it was impossible not to notice certain differences between himself and his sister and parents. Since his birth mother was Salvadoran, the most obvious difference was skin color.

Chris: “I noticed that their skin was a little whiter than mine, and mine was a little darker than theirs. I also recognized that I was the only one without glasses. So I asked them why, and they said that I came from a different place than them, and that’s mostly how I knew it.”

Kali: “I have gotten some weird looks, and kids have been like, ‘Why does he look different than you?’ And I just explain, and they kinda drop it. But I’m sure that if they did make fun of him, I wouldn’t like that. There have been times when I’ll be talking to a friend, and somehow one of us will bring up Chris. And if they haven’t seen him before, I’ll usually just say, ‘Oh, yeah, my brother’s a little different, because he’s actually adopted.’ But a lot of times that doesn’t happen. Especially when my friends and I are walking back from lunch, and Chris is coming in from recess; every time, he gives me a big hug. So, my friends are just like, ‘So, is he your little brother? Why doesn’t he look like you?’ And again, I just explain to them.”

Of course, there are other differences. Chris tends to be more athletic and more energetic than the rest of the family.

Chris: “My whole family besides me mostly likes to walk, but I like to run all day. Also, I don’t like to read that much, but Kali reads all the time. My favorite class in school is PE, but Kali likes the library, because she likes to check out new books.”

Chris does sometimes think about his birth mother.

Chris: “Sometimes I think, well, what does she look like? Because I don’t get to see her. Maybe, does she have glasses? Or, does she not have glasses?”

Most of the time, though, he’s just way too busy being a member of his family, which isn’t always easy. Like any other siblings, Chris and Kali sometimes fight.

Kali: “I think we interact the same way as we would if we were from the same parents. Because I’ve seen a lot of other brothers and sisters, and there’s really not much difference. It’s just the common, fight-fight, annoy-annoy, I didn’t do it, she did it... y’know.”

Chris: “We argue, but we argue about weird things. I annoy her, and then sometimes she annoys me.”

Every once in awhile, the fighting goes a little too far.

Kali: “When I’ve gotten really mad I’ve said stuff like, ‘You’re not my real brother.’ That’s something that he pretty much goes crazy on. Our parents really don’t like it when I do that because, I mean, he really IS my real brother. It’s really not about genes, and stuff like that. It more about how much you bond as a family.”

Next, read **Emily’s Story**.

Emily’s Story

Emily is 10 years old and lives in Virginia. with her parents, Stephanie and Barry.

Stephanie and Barry always knew in their hearts that adoption would be part of their family plan. They just assumed it would come after they had one or two kids the traditional way. But three years after they got married, they found themselves living and working India. They knew they were in the right place to adopt and decided that an adopted child would come first.

With help from friends who had adopted a son, Stephanie and Barry began working with an orphanage in the city of Delhi. The organization had a long waiting list but they decided to stick it out for a while, and months passed with no word on a child. The couple had just begun to explore other orphanages in the city of Calcutta when the call came from the Delhi orphanage, saying they had a baby for them.

Emily’s biological mom was unmarried when her daughter was born, and her birth father refused to take responsibility for his child. Since there’s a very serious social stigma on unwed moms in India, the woman’s family convinced her that adoption was the best option. She brought the baby to the orphanage in Delhi at the age of one month.

Emily: “When they first called the orphanage and asked if they had a baby for them, the orphanage said they didn’t. And then later, they called and said they had a baby, and that I was very sick, and that I was in the hospital for a while. If my parents hadn’t adopted me, I might have died.”

In the orphanage, Emily’s health had become a major issue. Chronic acid reflux made her spit up her food, which led to pneumonia. By the time she was five months old, her condition was going quickly downhill. That’s when her future mom and dad got the phone call. Although they were not at the top of the list, they were given the chance to adopt because as Americans, they were seen as more able to immediately provide the kind of medical care that baby Emily needed. They said yes, and brought Emily to their

home in India. Eight months later, they brought her home in America, where all her new relatives were waiting at the airport to welcome her.

Ten years later, Emily is happy and healthy. She and her parents choose to celebrate the fact that she was adopted by celebrating her “gotcha day,” which is the day she became a part of their family, as well as her birthday. Stephanie has even gone to her daughter’s school on that day to share her adoption story with the other students. The family also has a scrapbook album that starts on the day they brought Emily home and covers her first year of life.

Of course, Emily has always known that her skin is much darker than her parents’ skin, and that she looked “different” than her mom and dad.

Emily: “Once or twice when I was in kindergarten, people asked me why I didn’t look like my parents. I just said, uh, well I was adopted, so I don’t exactly look like my parents. My friends just accept it automatically. There are even two other kids in my school who were born in India. One of them is also adopted, and funnily enough, her name is also Emily!”

Over the years, Emily has asked questions about her birth, and has wondered if she would have been loved if she had stayed with her biological mother. But for the most part, she doesn’t dwell on the “what if’s” and stays focused on other stuff, like having fun with her friends, getting good grades, and making her parents proud. One of her favorite activities is swimming, which has revealed one major difference between her and her mom and dad...

Emily: “There is one thing I’ve done that I know neither my mom or dad would do, and that’s jump off a 19-foot tall diving board.”

Another difference is a surprising one: Emily’s parents love Indian food...but Emily can’t stand it! Despite these little differences, Emily fits right in with her “forever family.”

Emily: “I really, really like being in this family. It’s sort of cool knowing that you weren’t born by your mom. I’d like a little brother or sister someday. It wouldn’t matter at all if it were adopted, or if it came from my mom and dad.”

Nope, it doesn’t matter at all, and kids like Emily and Christopher prove that.