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A Family For Every Child



Matching Assistance



*"We should not be asking who this child belongs to,
but who belongs to this child."*

Adoption and the Holidays

Most children benefit from the predictability, familiarity and security that family rituals and traditions provide, especially during the December holiday season. Traditions connect families to their past, help them enjoy the present, and create lasting memories for the future. For adoptive families, rituals and traditions at holiday time can present some significant challenges in a number of ways. For children adopted at older ages, holiday time can conjure up important memories and associations. Whether having lived with birth families, in foster care (perhaps multiple homes), or in orphanages, children with positive or negative memories of what happened during this season - of how holidays were celebrated or not, are likely to experience powerful emotions related to their memories. There may be a resurgence of feelings of loss and grief, anxiety related memories of traumatic events, etc. The smells, the food, the music, the lights, the trees, the routines - everything may trigger behavior that is puzzling to parents.

Especially for children who are in their adoptive placements for the first holiday season, just learning how to be part of a family or part of this new family-- can be overwhelming, let alone with all of the added stress related to expectations of holiday celebration and family gatherings. "For parents who are eagerly anticipating sharing their holiday traditions with their children, there can be a real disconnect between their expectations and the children's responses," according to Madeleine Krebs, Clinical Coordinator at C.A.S.E. Ms. Krebs has helped many confused adoptive parents make sense of their children's experience of sadness at this supposed to be joyful time. "And kids may not tell you they are feeling sad or angry. They are more likely to demonstrate it through difficult behaviors - increased opposition, hyperactivity, etc."

Ms. Krebs suggests that parents help their children remember the people whom they have lost. "Light a candle, say a prayer, encourage the child to share stories." When children have contact with birth parents and/or siblings, parents need to be especially sensitive to the feelings that may surface as a result of visits during this time.

Parents can also learn about the traditions their children experienced in the past, and if they were positive and meaningful, find ways to incorporate those traditions into their holiday celebrations. One family found recipes to cook some of the foods that were part of the holiday meal that was served in their daughter's previous home. Of course, incorporating traditions can certainly be more complicated if the religion celebrated is different from the adoptive family's. However, many families do decide to incorporate aspects of the different religion to honor their child's past if they believe it is significant for their child. Each family situation is unique, of course, and each family will decide what is best.

Daphne Saunders-Houston, C.A.S.E. therapist notes that sometimes it is not just memories of holiday time that are important to adopted children, but also their desires and fantasies of what holiday time should be like. She says, "It is important to ask your child how they would like to celebrate." She describes a little boy who had never been to church on the holidays and who very much wanted to go. She also suggests that parents help their children to appreciate the commonalities between their values and the child's related to the holidays.

Families who adopt children who are from another country may also decide to use holiday time to celebrate their child's heritage. Since holiday time is a time for spending time with relatives and friends, it can also be a time for creating new traditions that the extended network can participate in. These new family traditions can help to foster the connections between the adopted child and the larger family network.

Making the Holidays Easier for Your Adopted Children

The holidays are a time of family and togetherness. They can also be a time of stress and disappointment. For adopted children, who may experience all of those emotions, the holidays may also be a time of unanswerable questions, a feeling of disconnection and a sense of emptiness.

If you have an adopted child, be aware of how the holidays may be affecting them. They may be wondering where their biological parents are, how they are celebrating the holiday and upset at the fact that they aren't there to celebrate with them. If you are celebrating the holidays with your adopted child, whether it's your first or your fifth, there are some things you can do to make it an easier time for them.

- **Incorporate Culture**

If your family adopted a child of a different ethnicity, there is a good chance that the child's culture and heritage will get lost unless an effort is made to preserve it. During the holidays, this can be done by incorporating your adopted child's culture into your family's celebration. That doesn't mean completely changing how you celebrate the holidays, but it does mean making some adjustments so that your adopted child gets a sense of culture and celebration as well.

- **Recognize Their Traditions**

If you adopted your child as a newborn or infant, they will not remember how holidays were celebrated in the past. But if you adopted an older child, ask them what good things they remember about the holidays and try to add those traditions to your own. Keeping some of the traditions from your child's past may help lessen their anxiety about the holidays, and create a sense of comfort and predictability that they may need.

- **Keep it Simple**

With parties, food, family and presents, the holidays can become overwhelming. For an adopted child who may not be familiar with your traditions and your family, it just may be too much and cause unnecessary anxiety. Keep the holidays simple until your child gets adjusted to their new family. Limit the number of parties you attend, the gifts you exchange and the family you introduce them to. Get a feel for how your child responds to different stimuli before attacking the holidays like you did before you adopted.

- **Answer Questions Honestly**

The holidays are a time of the year when adopted children tend to miss their families, even if they didn't know them. It may also be a time when they ask more questions about where they came from, who their families are and why they were put up for adoption. Do your best to answer the questions honestly, keeping in mind the age of your child. They may not be ready to hear all of details of their situation, so tell only what you think your child would be comfortable hearing.

- **Communicate**

Your child may be feeling a lot of different things during the holidays, and if they are shy or not yet comfortable communicating with you, you may never know what they're thinking. Don't forget to talk to your adopted child about what the holidays mean to them, what they are thinking about and how they'd like to celebrate.

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http://www.adoptionissues.org/adoption_and_holidays.html



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