



Naming & Claiming Your Adopted Child: A Guide for Parents

One of the very first things an expectant parent does is pick out a name for their child. Adoptive parents are no different; considering your child's name is an exciting time.

Naming is an intentional practice of claiming. Humans name things that have emotional importance in their lives; it is a way to inform others that there is a significant relationship between the person and the named person or object. For example, we name our domesticated pets, but farmers do not name the animals they raise for meat; people often give their cars names, children name their stuffed animals or blankets. Names give people an identity and are often tied to a family's culture.

For many adoptive parents and adoptive children, there is extra meaning in claiming a child through naming. The parent gives the child the family's surname to fold the child into their "clan." Many adoptive parents also give their adopted child a new first and/or middle name, and this is the stage where the concept of name = identity can get more muddled.

Most experts say that children should not be re-named once they are old enough to recognize and respond to their name. This can be as young as one year. However, adoptive parents often re-name their toddler or pre-school aged child, and in some cases even up through elementary age. Dr. Vera Fahlberg, the well-respected author of *A Child's Journey Through Placement*, cautions that "changes in the child's first name during [the toddler years] may carry an even higher risk than at other developmental stages" due to the combination of the separation from the child's birth parents and the strong developmental task during this age for ego and identity development.

Parents who adopt internationally often re-name, for many of the same reasons domestic adoptees are re-named, but also because some parents are afraid that people will not be able to pronounce "foreign" sounding names.

While naming your adopted child is a sign of claiming for the parents, for the child it can be hurtful and may even seem like the adoptive parents are trying to make them into someone else. One little boy, for example, had his name changed by his foster parents to "disguise" his more ethnic sounding name. Another child was given a "nick-name" by the maternal grandmother, because the grandmother disliked the child's father, whom the child was named after. However, the child loved her father and was proud of being named after him and would refer to herself by her given name when the grandmother was not around. Still another child asked to change his name because he associated his birth name with the "bad boy" who was victimized by his biological parents and felt a new name made him a "good boy." All these examples show the importance that names hold for children.

For some adoptive parents, keeping the child's birth name may be difficult, especially if the parents dreamed of having a child named "Junior," for example, to carry on the "family's name." If this is the case, the adoptive parents may need to think about whether the adopted child is a "replacement" child for the family, or symbolically represents an "ideal" child.

Some children do not want to be re-named. And many adults who were adopted as children often express that they felt their identities had been "erased" when they learn they were re-named. Although adoptive parents have good intentions when considering re-naming their child, they may need to look inside

themselves and consider whether the re-naming is for the child's best interests, or their own. Changing a child's name does not erase their past history and it won't eliminate that have a connection to their biological family.

Dr. Fahlberg advises that plans for proposed name changes be discussed with the child. Although most children understand that families often share surnames and welcome this change, some children find changing the surname threatening. Discussions about name changes between the adoptive parents and the child need to be addressed prior to the finalization.

Talking to the youth about naming is a wonderful opportunity for adoptive parents to begin to understand the youth's feelings around their birth family, their culture and their history.

Adoptive parents can consider the following things when thinking about changing your adopted child's name:

- Is the desire to re-name based on the parent's dream of having a child with a special name?
- Is the desire to re-name based on negative feelings towards the child's biological family?
- Is your adopted child named after someone in their biological family? How will the child feel about having that connection changed?
- Is the desire to re-name based on negative feelings about the child's race or ethnicity? If so, parents may need to examine their feelings about other aspects of adopting a child of a different race, ethnicity or culture.
- Does the child's name have cultural ties? Will re-naming a cultural name into a more "Anglicized" name cut off cultural ties?
- If the child speaks another language, the name may be even more important for the child as it may be the only linguistic tie to their culture of origin unless the adoptive family speaks the language or is bilingual.
- Does the child hold negative feelings about his or her birth family?
- Does the child have siblings with similar or same names/surnames?

Some children want to change their names. It is not uncommon for older elementary-aged children and teens to ask to change their name, and sometimes their choices seem out-there for adoptive parents. Some kids want to keep their part or all of their names but change the spelling because of pronunciation. A frank conversation about the proposed name change should include exploring reasons why the youth has chosen the name, and to see if it is appropriate to incorporate or keep part of the youth's birth name once the adoption is finalized.