

SO MUCH MORE THAN A NAME

Naming your child is a big event in the process of becoming a parent. It ranks higher than deciding how to decorate their room, buying the outfit for their first trip home, and being sure you have enough diapers on hand. There seems to be so much pressure on making this decision. Do you pass on a family name? What will the initials be? Can it be rhymed with something bad that other kids will use to tease them? Your mind is constantly trying new ones on for size and then analyzing it from every direction in order to decide if it will make your "list".

While this pressure to find the perfect name is a standard for any parent, for adoptive parents there is a door that opens up to a whole new set of questions that can become completely overwhelming. The birthmother. Will she choose a name first? If she does, should we keep it or change it? If we have the opportunity, should we discuss it with her and decide together? What if we have a name we've always wanted? What if she does not like the name we do? The questions can flow over and over into an adoptive parent's mind like waves crashing on the shore, erasing each idea that was written in the sand and washing it out to sea.

As an adoptive parent, how do you face these questions? As a counselor, what kind of advice can you offer them, or the birthmother? Is there a "right" way to do this?

We are unique individuals. This is why each adoption is so unique and also why making a decision for a name will be unique as well. But understanding what some of the options are and taking the time to discuss them openly will be your keys to finding the answers that are right for you. Most importantly, understand that your opinion DOES count. Talk about how you feel, be open and honest. On the other hand, also be respectful of what you hear from others and how they feel. When everyone approaches this with respect and honest emotion, the answers will come.

When I placed my son for adoption in 1985, I was told that if I wanted to name him, I could, but that it was likely the adoptive parents would change it. I was okay with the idea of them changing it, they would be his parents, and I understood how important naming your child can be and did not want to take that from them. But I also did not want my son to be called "the baby" for two weeks. So, after much thought, I named him Joseph Paul. My little gift to him, it would go on his original birth certificate and always be a reminder of his beginnings. And that was enough for me.

Then, later that year when the first letters from his parents arrived, they extended a gift to me. His mother wrote that they decided to keep the name I had chosen because they felt I must have had special reasons for choosing it and it was their gift to me. He wouldn't be

leaving his "beginnings" behind but would rather keep his time with me forever - represented through his name. They said it also represented names within their family so it was the perfect blend between my family and theirs. I could not have been more honored and happier. At that moment, my heart totally broke open with love and trust for this couple. Their sign of respect for me came full circle as I then became full of respect for them. This became the foundation for an amazing relationship.

Today, there is typically more communication between birthmothers and adoptive parents in the beginning. Adoptive parents who let the birthmother know they respect her opinion and would like to hear it will do much for building a respectful relationship. If the birthmother's suggestion is something that works with your family (such as in my case), then it would be a wonderful symbol to agree to keep the name. If not, you may wish to use it as a middle name instead or suggest something close to it.

When choosing names, it is important to "remember the why." Adoptive parents who understand why a birthmother chooses a particular name will have a better foundation for making their decision. For example, if a birthmother picks a name simply because she likes the sound of it, it may be there are other names she will like as well. But if she picks a name because of the significance to her family (as I did), then the adoptive parents may wish to give it more careful consideration before choosing to change it. Anytime you can show respect to both families in the choosing of a name, the better.

Even when there is no contact with a birthmother, as in many intra-country adoptions, your child may have been given a name already. Consider incorporating this into the name you choose as a sign to your child of respect for their heritage.

The focus should always be the child. Sometimes, a name is just a name and that is okay! Sometimes it holds great importance and that's okay too. Take the time to discuss it, share expectations and respect what you hear from each other. With the thousands of possibilities for names in this world it seems incredible that both parties wouldn't be able to find one that everyone can agree to - especially if their focus is on the child and not themselves.

Names reflect who we are, what our parents were thinking about at the time of our birth, our heritage, and so much more. Taking time to respect these issues when choosing a name for an adopted child will give them a story of love - and a name - they can carry with pride!

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