



Understanding Infant Adoption 7 Handout

Adoption Language Worksheet

Language Matters

Appropriate adoption language helps us to:

- Correct or avoid outdated or harmful messages related to adoption
- Honor the choices made by expectant/birth parents
- Affirm the adoptee–adoptive parent relationship
- Validate the wide range of feelings related to adoption that may be experienced by adoptees, birth/first families, and adoptive families
- Respect all members of the adoption constellation.

Outdated or Harmful Phrases and Terms to Avoid

There are some terms or phrases that should not be used when speaking about adoption.

Instead of...	Please use...	Why?
Adopt out, give away, put up for adoption, give up for adoption	Make an adoption plan, place for adoption	<i>Reflect here on why the terms in the first column may be considered harmful...</i>
Keep the baby	Choose to parent the child, plan to raise the child	<i>Reflect here on why the terms in the first column may be considered harmful...</i>

Instead of...	Please use...	Why?
Real parent, natural parent	Birth parent/mother/father First parent/mother/father Biological parent/mother/father Mother/father (depending on stage of the adoption)	<i>Reflect here on why the terms in the first column may be considered harmful...</i>
Unwanted pregnancy	Unplanned pregnancy, unintended pregnancy, unexpected pregnancy	<i>Reflect here on why the terms in the first column may be considered harmful...</i>
Not their own/real child	Adoptee (or adopted person, adopted individual), came to their family through adoption, joined their family through adoption, became part of their family through adoption	<i>Reflect here on why the terms in the first column may be considered harmful...</i>
Illegitimate	Born to unmarried parents, born to a single parent	<i>Reflect here on why the terms in the first column may be considered harmful...</i>
Foreign adoption	Intercountry adoption, international adoption	<i>Reflect here on why the terms in the first column may be considered harmful...</i>
Foreign child, foreign adoptee	Child, adoptee, intercountry adoptee	<i>Reflect here on why the terms in the first column may be considered harmful...</i>

Understanding the Right Context

Some terms and phrases are not inherently harmful, but there may be some contexts when they can be used and others when they should not.

Who	Context
Birth/first parent(s) vs. parent(s) vs. expectant parent(s)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Before a baby has been born, the parents are "expectant parents." • After a baby is born, but prior to the voluntary termination of parental rights (TPR), use the term "parent/mom/dad." The term "birth parent" could potentially imply coercion. • After the baby is born and parental rights are terminated, use the term "birth parent" or "first parent."
Prospective adoptive parents vs. parents (adoptive parents)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Before the adoption has been finalized, use the term "prospective adoptive parents." • After the adoption has been finalized, use the term "parents."

Who	Context
Adopted child and adoptive parents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> When speaking to or about a child that a parent has adopted, it is recommended to simply use "child," "son," or "daughter" rather than specifying "adopted child." When speaking to or about parents who have adopted a child, you can call them simply the child's "parent(s)," "mother," or "father" rather than specifying "adoptive parent(s)."

Appropriate Ways to Celebrate or Encourage

While typically well-intended, some statements meant to encourage or compliment may instead feel like a dismissal of nuance or an attempt to gloss over difficult feelings.

Instead of saying...	Try to...	Why?
To a birth/first parent: "You're so brave/selfless."	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Validate all feelings, even if they don't match what you would expect someone to feel. Affirm that you can see how much she/they love her/their baby. 	<i>Reflect here on why the statement in the first column may be considered inappropriate...</i>
To an adoptive parent: "How wonderful that you adopted a child in need!"	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Validate all feelings, even if they don't match what you would expect someone to feel. Affirm that it is beautiful to have a loving family, a wonderful support system, etc., or that you can see how much the parent and child love one another. 	<i>Reflect here on why the statement in the first column may be considered inappropriate...</i>
To or about an adoptee: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> "You/They are so lucky to have been adopted." "You/They must be so grateful to have been adopted." 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Validate all feelings, even if they don't match what you would expect someone to feel. Affirm that it is beautiful to have a loving family, a wonderful support system, etc., or that you can see how much the family members love one another. Affirm feelings of loss related to birth/first family and be aware of how comments related to gratefulness and luckiness invalidate this grief. 	<i>Reflect here on why the statement in the first column may be considered inappropriate...</i>

Additional Considerations

Preferred terms: There is a wide range of terms with which members of the adoption constellation might identify. Hospital-based staff may wish to proactively ask for feedback on preferred terms. If a birth parent, adoptee, or adoptive parent shares with you that they prefer a specific term or that they find another term or phrase problematic, always take their lead.

Birth parent interactions: Hospital-based professionals working directly with patients considering adoption should feel comfortable talking about the basics of adoption. However, other hospital-based professionals who even briefly interact with patients considering adoption should also be prepared to interact with them without causing harm or pain.

For example:

- A dietary aide bringing a birth parent a meal
- A phlebotomist taking a birth parent's blood for labs
- A patient transporter moving a birth parent to a different room
- The accounting department interfacing with the birth parents

Hospital-based professionals interacting with expectant or birth parents who are unsure what to say or are afraid to say the wrong thing can try asking respectful questions geared toward meeting needs instead. Asking a patient how they're doing or if they need anything can offer them a chance to open up or refrain from sharing if they desire. As above, follow the patient's lead on information sharing. Be mindful of commenting on their plan or asking intrusive questions about their decision. Defer to social workers and others on the medical team whose specific role is to provide guidance and referrals. Allow the patient to initiate further conversation if they choose.

Sources

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About the Adoption-Sensitive Clinical Care Project

It is critical that expectant parents who may wish to place a child for adoption have access to appropriately trained staff and comprehensive supports throughout the adoption process. The federally-funded Adoption-Sensitive Clinical Care Project and the Understanding Infant Adoption curriculum are being administered by [National Council For Adoption](#) (NCFA), [The Adoption & Foster Care Clinic](#), [Spaulding for Children](#), and [University of Washington School of Social Work](#) for the project period 2024-2026.

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