

THE DONALDSON ADOPTION INSTITUTE

THE ADOPTED LIFE DISCUSSION GUIDE

Introduction

The Adopted Life is a web series created by transracial adoptee, Angela Tucker, featuring 1-on-1 conversations between herself and transracially adopted youth, discussing various topics around adoption. The goal for the series is to elevate and normalize the adoptee voice and provide trustworthy open-source content to the public (available on theadoptedlife.com/episodes).

The Donaldson Adoption Institute (DAI) is thrilled to partner with Angela and her creative partner Bryan to create a companion discussion guide for [Episode 3](#) of *The Adopted Life* Episodes

The hope is that adoptive families, agencies and professionals utilize the episodes along with the discussion guide as resources to better understand and serve transracially adopted youth and to help educate the broader public on the experiences of transracially adopted people.

A special thank you to the young people that participated and to All Together Now (ATN) where they all participate as volunteer teen mentors.

ATN is a support organization for adoptive families. ATN offers fun, multiracial, and age-appropriate peer support groups and playgroups facilitated by adult and teen adoptees for adopted kids from a wide spectrum of backgrounds. A committee of adult adoptees, adoptive parents, and teen adoptees organize and put together the playgroups. ATN also provides space for adoptive parents to gather, connect and share resources. For more information about the program, please visit the website: <https://www.alltogetheradoption.org/>.



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The Importance of Understanding Adoption

One of the greatest impediments to meaningful reforms in adoption and foster care are the societal misperceptions and general lack of knowledge surrounding this experience.

A lack of understanding surrounding adoption has plagued families and individuals for many decades. In some cases, this holds families back from healthy and fulfilling experiences, and in others, it impedes their well-being and contributes to serious challenges. There are a variety of reasons these misperceptions exist.

Statistically, those with a direct, personal connection to adoption (as an adopted person, adoptive parent or first/birth parent) represent a small fraction of the overall population. According to DAI's public opinion research, just 4% of adults in the U.S. have a direct connection to adoption. Yet this experience isn't as niche as it may first seem—our research also reveals that 60% of the American public has some connection to adoption by either knowing someone who is adopted or who has adopted a child. This number increases when we add in first/birth parents, who have been historically marginalized as part of the extended family of adoption.

What also fuels a lack of knowledge are the stereotypes perpetuated in the media and popular culture, which often highlight the dramatic fairytale or cautionary nightmare when depicting adoption. The reality of this experience is many more shades of gray with most of us dwelling in the in-between spaces versus the extremes. Yet these headlines and made-for-TV movie plots increase stigma and misunderstanding. This makes it all the more difficult to enact needed changes in policy and practice, which ultimately hurts children and families.

Watching and discussing *The Adopted Life* provides an opportunity to gain precious insight from young people who so generously share their personal adoption experiences.

Note to Facilitators

As a curator of the group discussion, your role is to provide a safe place for participants to come together with *The Adopted Life* Episode at the center.

Here are a few tips to ensuring a practical, productive and poignant discussion:

Tip #1: Know Your Audience

If there is any way to have some knowledge of the group you will facilitate, that is ideal. But if you are coming into a room where you do not know the participants, be sure to get a sense of who is in the room. Ask some easy initial group questions where people can raise hands to self-identify as a member of the community, professional or ally. It is also helpful to have a plan surrounding breaking up larger groups into smaller groups should that be appropriate.

Tip #2: Set Ground Rules/Rules of Engagement

Regardless of the size and make-up of the group, it is important that participants:

1. Know how long the discussion will be (ideally, this will be established beforehand and participants know how long the discussion is scheduled for) and be sure to create a beginning and end so there is a proper opening and closing of the discussion.
2. Work together to establish the basic ground rules such as “one mic” so that people do not talk over one another, approximately how much “air time” people should have, and what to do with cell phone usage during the session.

Tip #3: Create an Open and Safe Discussion

While everyone is entitled to their own opinions and feelings, make sure participants understand that this still must be an environment that allows everyone the freedom to express themselves. In essence, clearly articulate to your group that personal and discriminatory attacks will not be tolerated.

General Thoughts and Questions

As a jumping-off place, after viewing the episode, invite the participants to write down their initial reactions, thoughts and feelings about what they watched. Here are a few thought-starters:

1. What is your personal connection to adoption?
2. Were there any specific individuals you found more interesting or whom you identified with versus others and why?
3. What surprised you the most about what you saw?

Specific Area of Exploration: Identity/Transracial Adoption

Background

Transracial adoption results in perhaps the most visible group of adoptive families. Based on the 2007 National Survey of Adoptive Parents, 40% of adopted children (not including those adopted by their stepparents) were involved in a transracial, transethnic, or transcultural adoption. (Sharon Vandivere, Karin Malm, and Laura Radel. *Adoption USA: A Chartbook Based on the 2007 National Survey of Adoptive Parents*)

DAI's *Beyond Culture Camp: Promoting Healthy Identity Formation in Adoption* research found that:

- Adoption is an increasingly significant aspect of identity for adopted people as they age, and remains so even when they are adults.
- Race/ethnicity is an increasingly significant aspect of identity for those adopted across color and culture.
- Coping with discrimination is an important part of coming to terms with racial/ethnic identity for adoptees of color.
- Discrimination based on adoption is a reality, but more so for white adoptees, who also report being somewhat less comfortable with their adoptive identity as adults than do their Korean counterparts (Author: Hollee McGinnis, Susan Smith, Scott. Ryan and Jeanne Howard Published: November 2009).

For Discussion

1. Did you see differences of race playing a role in the identity of the young people featured in the episodes?
2. Do you know what “code-switching” is? If so, how was it represented in this episode?
3. Are differences of race and culture part of your adoption experience? If so, how does this play out in your life?
4. Identity is something that is developed over time. Do you have a sense where you are in your personal identity development? What role, if any, does adoption play in this?

Specific Area of Exploration: Openness in Adoption

Background

Openness in adoption refers to the relationship and communication between members of the adoptive family and members of the first/birth family. Although openness is common today, the level can vary. With the right supports, families can develop and sustain authentic relationships with one another that ensure everyone's well-being.

DAI's research has consistently supported the fact that openness in adoption is largely beneficial to all members of the extended family of adoption and that over 95% of agency adoptions that occur today have some level of openness.

Benefits that research have highlighted include healthy identity development for adopted people, greater satisfaction in the adoption process, and less grief, regret and worry for birth parents who have contact than those who experienced a closed adoption.

Young people in open adoptions also have a better understanding of the meaning of adoption and more active communication about adoption with their adoptive parents. For adoptive parents in open adoptions, greater openness is linked with reduced fear of and greater empathy toward first/birth parents, and more open communication with their children about adoption.

For Discussion

1. Open adoption is something that many people are talking about today. Do you know what it is and how it works?
2. Several of the young people talked of open adoption or openness in adoption. Do you have any personal experience with open adoption? If so, what has that been like for you? If not, do you wish you had more openness in your adoption experience?

Specific Area of Exploration: Search and Reunion

Reunions between adopted people and their biological families are popular topics in the news media and on TV programming. Yet often these sensationalized stories don't represent the true reality of these complex journeys. What's important is that you don't rely on these representations as a template for the search experience; in fact, the real heavy lifting for an adopted person often occurs when they are engaged in the process of deciding whether or not they wish to search. This part of the journey may not be worthy of a TV mini-series, yet it is a critical time when an adopted person needs the support and validation of their loved ones.

An adopted person's decision to search can be just as complex, exhilarating, painful and poignant as the search itself and the possible reunion that may follow. Ultimately, this is a decision that takes a tremendous amount of courage, which is why unconditional support from family and friends is crucial during this time.

For Discussion

1. What are your thoughts about searching for biological family members?
2. Have you ever considered investigating and exploring your family history? If you were interesting in doing this, what tools do you think you could use and what supports do you think are needed?
3. People often have mixed feelings about searching and a possible reunion. What are your feelings about this?

Specific Area of Exploration: Realities of Adoption

Background

Too often in adoption, the focus is on the process and procedures, with many believing the end goal is the final decree of adoption issued by a court. Today, we know from research and the real experiences from members of the adoption community that there is so much that comes before this—and even more to this experience that will come after—that requires our ongoing focus and attention. In order to best support the extended family of adoption, we must understand the realities of adoption and ensure the proper supports are in place for families throughout their lives.

When we understand adoption as the transformational experience it truly is, we will best be able to serve the needs of children and families and ensure their healthy identity and development over time.

For Discussion

1. Many of the young people featured speak to what happens in their daily lives as it relates to adoption. What are some of those everyday realities that we heard? Did any of the realities shared surprise you?
2. Why do you think people not connected to adoption find the experience so interesting? And what can be done to educate more people about the realities?

Specific Area of Exploration: Talking about Adoption

Background

Research demonstrates that talking openly about adoption, in age and developmentally appropriate ways, is a significant benefit to adopted children, particularly as they develop their identity and self-esteem.

Research and best practice highlight the need for ongoing conversations about adoption and the exploration of thoughts and feelings surrounding adoption. Parents are encouraged to take the initiative very early on and lead this dialogue versus waiting for a child to have questions. This includes active communications with the child about the inherent truth that they were born, as all people are and that this comes before an adoption.

When these conversations begin at home from day one, it becomes easier for children and young people to talk about adoption outside of their home and family environment where questions will no doubt arise.

For Discussion

1. What are some of the challenges of talking about adoption in a meaningful way?
2. What is one thing you'd like to say or ask about adoption that you never felt you could?
3. Do you ever feel you have to talk about adoption because of how your family looks?