

The Truth About Domestic Adoption

I keep hearing that adopting in the U.S. is rare, expensive, and risky. The statistics—and my own experience—argue otherwise.

Not long after my husband and I adopted our infant daughter, we went to a summer barbecue where we met another couple with a young child. When it came up that we had adopted Beth domestically at birth, they were unbelieving. “We thought that didn’t happen,” they objected, seemingly incredulous that our family could exist at all.

I was tempted to quip that the three of us furnished living proof to the contrary. While our adoption wait lasted 18 months and had its share of ups and downs, it was by far the least difficult leg on our journey to parenthood. Once we made the decision to adopt, I was buoyed by a sense of hope and expectation, knowing that we would now inevitably become parents. By contrast, the preceding years of invasive tests, failed treatments and miscarriages lasted

BY ELIZA NEWLIN CARNEY



twice as long and were a dark time.

Still, I spared the couple at the barbecue wry quips and lengthy sagas, and instead tried to explain that domestic adoption is still quite common, that we know literally dozens of families like ours. But our new friends remained skeptical, even suspicious. They continued to insist that infant adoptions such as ours didn’t happen any more.

Since then I’ve fielded lots of similarly ill-informed questions and comments about the way we built our family. Fortunately for us, most of our friends and relations are either too tactful or too knowledgeable to make offen-

sive remarks. But as any adoptive parent can attest, the myths that surround domestic adoption are legion, and they are surprisingly well-entrenched.

PERSISTENT MYTHS

One fellow adoptive mom told me that she’d been asked point-blank how much her daughter had cost. Another said that a friend wanted to know: “Do you think you love your child as much as if she had been born to you?” And virtually no parent in a domestic adoption hasn’t been asked, in one way or another: “Aren’t you afraid the real mother will try to take her back?”

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To a degree, such blundering remarks reflect a simple lack of information. For those with no direct adoption experience, a little education can go a long way. But just beneath the surface of these myths lurk some unpleasant value judgments. The popular image of infant domestic adoption, particularly as reflected in sensational news stories and movies, is often less than pretty.

In the public eye, it seems, the typical domestic adoption looks something like this: Adopting parents wait five years or more for a baby, pay tens of thousands of dollars, and remain at constant risk of having their child snatched away by birthparents. (The birthmother was a troubled teenager who was coerced into adoption in the first place.) Adoptees exhibit a range of behavioral and identity problems. The bonds between adoptive parents and their children are not as strong as those between blood relations. And so on.

To adoptive families, such stereotypes seem so outrageous that they hardly merit rebuttal. Nevertheless, we often find ourselves acting as educators and advocates. This is also true for families formed through international adoption, of course. But the false assumptions around domestic adoption seem particularly persistent—and far off the mark.

MYTH #1: THERE ARE NO INFANTS AVAILABLE FOR ADOPTION IN THE U.S.

Take, for instance, the widespread belief that, as one woman assured me, “there are no babies” being placed for adoption in the United States. While domestic adoption statistics are hard to come by, the Alexandria, Virginia-based National Council for Adoption estimates that 20,000 or more U.S.-born infants are placed for adoption every year. That’s more than the 19,000 or so international adoptions annually.

To be sure, infant domestic placements are less common than they were 30 years ago. [To understand why, see

the interview with adoption historian Barbara Melosh on page 36 of this issue.] But there is a substantial community of families formed through domestic adoption in this country, and their story goes largely untold.

MYTH #2: ENDLESS WAIT AND PROHIBITIVE COST

The myth of the five-year wait also appears to be unfounded. The agencies and lawyers I spoke to assured me that a more typical wait would be one to two years. Nor are domestic adoption fees so staggering as people tend to assume they are. They can range from as little as

\$4,000 to \$10,000. (In cases where people choose to adopt without the assistance of an agency, the wait and cost are less predictable. Perhaps the exceptional, high-cost cases in this category are the ones people hear about.) Most domestic adoption agencies are nonprofits, with sliding scales based on income.

It should go without saying (but doesn’t) that the fees involved in adoption pay for such services as social work counseling and legal consultation—not for “buying” a baby, which is illegal around the world and in every state in the U.S. All aspects of adoption are regulated by state laws and reviewed by judges who preside over finalizations to assure that “baby buying” does not occur. I’m often struck that the same folks who inquire how much our adoption cost would never dream of asking proud parents who’ve just given birth in a hospital how much they (or

their insurance) paid in medical bills.

MYTH #3: THE BIG BAD BIRTHPARENTS

Particularly pernicious is the myth that birthparents can resurface at any time and reclaim their children. One mom I interviewed calls this the “Big Bad Birthmother” myth.) Notwithstanding the much-publicized cases of Baby Richard and Baby Jessica—both adoptions, by the way, to which the birthfather never consented—less than one percent of domestic adoptions are contested in the courts.

Of course, domestic adoption does involve an element of legal risk. Once birthparents have given their consent, they have a small window of time in which to change their minds. (In Maryland, where we adopted Beth, that so-called revocation period was 30 days.) It is vitally important for everyone involved—parents and children—to know that the birthparents have been given every opportunity to make the right decision and feel good about it. By the time an adoption is finalized, both adoptive parents and birthparents are cognizant of the fact that the family formed by adoption is the one recognized as the child’s family under the law. Post-placement revocations are devastating when they occur, but they are extremely rare.

MYTH #4: OPEN ADOPTION CONFUSES CHILDREN

A corresponding myth—that open adoption invites birthmothers to intrude

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How Domestic and International Adoptions Compare: Cost and Wait

Five-year waits? Extortionate fees? Results from our reader’s poll tell a different story.

	Domestic Adopters	International Adopters
Waited one year or less.....	65%.....	90%
Waited two years or less.....	93%.....	100%
Total cost less than \$15,000*.....	49%.....	26%
Total cost less than \$20,000*.....	72%.....	48%

*Before the Adoption Tax Credit

Source: Adoptive Families Reader Poll, May/June 2001

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on adoptive families—is likewise unfounded. Parents who choose open adoption are often hard-pressed to convince friends and relations that birthparent contact can be positive. Instead of meddling, many adoptive parents say, birthmothers tend to be reluctant to intrude. Nor do children appear confused about which is their “real” family. Susan Saidman, director of the domestic infant program at Adoptions Together agency in Silver Spring, Maryland, says, “Even when adults are confused, children are remarkably clear about relationships. As my daughter informed me one day, ‘I love my birthmother because she made me alive; I love you because you take care of me.’” For Janice Witt, an adoptive mother of two living in Orange County, California, face-to-face contact with her children’s birthparents “really dispels myths and insecurities, rather than creating more, because you have an open and honest relationship with the birthparents.”

MYTH #5: THE TEENAGED BIRTHMOTHER

Another variant of the “Big Bad Birthmother” myth is the one that says birthparents are troubled or callous. Making an adoptive placement remains frowned-on by much of our society—one reason, I believe, that so many people are eager to assume that our daughter’s birthmother was a teenager. In fact, adoption professionals tell us that most birthmothers today are older than 18. Some are struggling to rear a first child and don’t believe they can manage parenting a second. Yet the idea of a pregnant teenager making an adoption plan strikes many as more acceptable, and perhaps less threatening, than the notion of an adult woman facing such difficulties that adoption is her best option.

“One of the biggest, hardest myths for birthmothers is that they don’t care,” says Susan Saidman. “They do care. They care enough to know that they can’t parent at this time.”

Telling It Like It Is

- Myth:** There are no babies being placed for adoption in the U.S. **Reality:** 20,000 or more U.S.-born infants are placed for adoption each year.
- Myth:** Adopting parents must wait five years or more for a baby. **Reality:** The average wait in a domestic adoption is less than two years.
- Myth:** Adopting parents pay extortionate amounts—tens and tens of thousands of dollars. **Reality:** Costs to adopt domestically average \$15,000. After the Adoption Tax Credit, the cost is comparable to that of giving birth in a hospital.
- Myth:** Birthparents can arrive at any time to reclaim their child. **Reality:** Once an adoption is finalized, the adoptive family is recognized as the child’s family by law.
- Myth:** Birthmothers are all troubled teens. **Reality:** Most birthmothers today are older than 18. In most cases, it’s lack of resources that causes them to place their children for adoption.
- Myth:** Adoptees are all maladjusted. **Reality:** Studies show that adoptees are as well adjusted as their non-adopted peers.

MYTH #6: THE TROUBLED ADOPTEE

Perhaps the most damaging myth of all is the one that says adoptees are disproportionately troubled, developmentally and emotionally. If anything, recent research suggests, adoptees may be better adjusted than their non-adopted peers. Adopted adolescents have a positive self-image and resolve their identity concerns “at rates as high or higher than their peers,” according to a study titled Growing Up Adopted, conducted by the Minneapolis-based Search Institute. The study also found that adolescent adoptees have “extremely high rates of strong attachment to adoptive parents”—debunking the notion that adoptive families have weaker bonds than those related by blood.

THE TRUTH: IT’S UP TO YOU TO DISPEL THE MYTHS

For families touched by adoption, combating all the myths may seem like a

burden. Yet there’s an urgent need to set the record straight because such myths have serious consequences. Women in crisis pregnancies who receive bad information (or no information) about adoption may make parenting decisions they’ll later regret. Prospective adoptive parents who are spooked by domestic horror stories may overlook an important option, or reject openness for unsound reasons. For adoptees, the message that their “real” parents are elsewhere and may come to reclaim them could be devastating. Children need to understand that adoption is forever.

While I cannot anticipate every hurtful or misinformed comment my daughter will hear over the years, I can arm her with some basic facts: That we are her very “real” parents and will be here for her for

the rest of her life; that she was not “given up” for adoption, but loved by her birthmother and birthfather, who chose us to be her Mom and Dad; and that adoption is a normal way to build a family—even when it happens right here in the United States.

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DOMESTIC ADOPTERS:

Have you run into these sorts of misconceptions about the way you formed your family? How have you handled it? Please share your stories with us.

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