



*By creating forever families, adoption unites parents and children, links birth and adoptive relatives, and builds friendships between fellow adoptive families. Adoption Month is cause for celebration—an occasion to remember, appreciate, and announce the joy adoption can bring to families. In this chapter, we suggest ways to celebrate adoption at home with your family and publicly with your support group or professional community.*



# Celebration

## At Home

Although adoptees hear adoption messages—both good and bad—from the media, their school, and their friends, the most important source of adoption information is what they hear at home. Even the most diligent, open, and aware adoptive parents can neglect adoption as a topic of conversation amid the busy routine of day-to-day family life. Adoption Month is a great time to plan special ways and occasions to talk about adoption, culture, and family connections—and perhaps start habits that last year-long.



### Rituals

Meaningful celebrations are built on things that already have value to the family; they involve finding new ways to make the daily activities of family life important. Sometimes celebrations are spur of the moment occurrence that get everyone involved and are remembered fondly for years. Other celebrations are planned and happen over and over again, becoming family rituals. Rituals can be anything from regularly attending worship services to always having waffles for the Saturday evening meal.

When planning new rituals to celebrate with your family, ask yourself and your family members:

- ☞ What are the things that make our family unique?
- ☞ What values are important?
- ☞ What things do we already do to make each person feel connected?
- ☞ How do we have fun together as a family?
- ☞ How do we support one another in times of need?
- ☞ How do we show love, express feelings, and demonstrate respect for one another?

Adoption Month celebrations and year-round rituals can expressly involve discussing adoption, or they can just be planned times for togetherness. By seeing special moments to celebrate everyday (during November and beyond), children more meaningfully appreciate the joy of life. To start building new rituals:

- ☞ Find out how children's birth or foster families (or families from their country or culture of origin) celebrate holidays. Include some of the best ideas in your own

celebration. If the child recalls negative traditions, create new, better memories.

- ☞ Each Adoption Month, repeat shared seasonal activities such as attending county, school, or state fairs; taking apple orchard or fall foliage outings; participating in a community harvest or powwow; or getting outdoors for a final fall camping trip or picnic.
- ☞ Set aside a day (in addition to the birthdays and anniversaries you already celebrate) that belongs to each member of the family. On this day, highlight that member with a picture on the table or photo album for all to see. Include a story time, during which everyone else tells a positive and enlightening story about that person. Make a badge or ribbon for the honored person to wear.

Breakfast, lunch, and dinner offer excellent opportunities for ritual building. At mealtimes, you not only have the chance to nourish bodies, but relationships, too. A sharing and respectful attitude toward this time together can build bridges of understanding and a sense of belonging to the family. You might:

- ☞ Set aside one day of the month as special meal day. Use the best dishes, chose and prepare a menu together, and dress up for the event. Candlelight can add to the mood.
- ☞ Encourage children who are new to your home to share some of their favorite foods or recipes.
- ☞ Serve a certain food at a regular time of the week—for example, pizza on Fridays or popcorn on Sunday nights—the association then becomes “pizza/popcorn time is sharing time.”
- ☞ As a family, gather and prepare the food for certain meals. For example, visit a farmer's market and have each family

*You can discover more about a person in an hour of play than in a year of conversation.*

—Plato

member choose a fresh vegetable. Then the family together makes a group salad or vegetable plate.

- ☞ Go around the table sharing, on different days, a thought for the day, a wish for someone else at the table, a favorite memory, a happening at school or work, a reaction to a current event, a joke, a dream, or a plan for the week.
- ☞ Have one-on-one mealtime on an occasional but scheduled basis. For example, dad takes one child out for breakfast early every Wednesday morning, or mom takes one child out for lunch every other Saturday.

Be patient and keep things simple. Try to build in just a few things that most people in the family are likely to feel comfortable with. You can add more later, including suggestions from the group.

*Adapted from Celebrations Family Style,  
by Charles Numrich and Jan Hoppe,  
Professional Association of Treatment Homes (PATH), 1992*

## Calendar

To more specifically celebrate adoption and Adoption Month, create a calendar of observances for the month and year. Select a project or goal for each day (or week) of the month [see page 90], write those goals on a calendar, and complete the work as a family. Take note of other awareness months and special holidays during the year and schedule one or two projects for those times as well.

## Cultural Appreciation

In honor of Adoption Month, you can also choose to celebrate your children and heighten their sense of confidence by making their culture come alive. Cultural celebrations also foster anti-bias sentiments in children. To promote cultural awareness and enhance children's self-esteem:

- ☞ Create a home environment that reflects the child's racial background. Learn about cultural traditions, practices, and holidays. Help children understand and take pride in where they come from by putting up a map of their country of origin,

displaying artwork from their culture, and providing them with books or videos about the country and language.

- ☞ Become familiar with your child's heritage. Learn more about traditions, achievements, or the style of dress within the culture. Make plans with your child to celebrate an upcoming holiday or attend a cultural festival.
- ☞ Talk positively about each child's physical characteristics and cultural heritage. Tell your child how beautiful he or she is, and share pictures of other beautiful people who have the same ethnic background. Tell stories about people from that ethnic group of whom you are especially proud.
- ☞ Find mentors or role models for your child. Children of color need to know other people who look like them, and experience the strengths and richness of their heritage. Associating with others of the same cultural background helps children to develop a sense of belonging and pride.



## Take & Use

### Observances throughout the Year

<b>January</b> Mentoring	<b>June</b> Safety Father's Day (third Sunday)
<b>February</b> Black History	<b>September</b> Grandparent's Day (first Sunday after Labor Day)
<b>March</b> Women's History	<b>October</b> Domestic Violence Awareness Crime Prevention Hispanic Heritage Disability Awareness
<b>April</b> Autism Child Abuse Prevention Siblings' Day (April 10)	<b>November</b> Native American Heritage
<b>May</b> Foster Care Awareness School Safety Awareness Teen Pregnancy Prevention Asian Pacific American Heritage Mother's Day (second Sunday)	<b>December</b> AIDS Awareness

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## Take & Use

### A Month of Adoption Activities

- 1 Kick off Adoption Month by distributing adoption-themed posters or flyers.
- 2 Sign up for a November adoption conference or call your agency to find out about Adoption Month events that are open to the public.
- 3 Visit a restaurant, exhibit, or event that celebrates a family member's ethnic or cultural background.
- 4 Donate time or money to your favorite adoption, foster care, or child welfare organization.
- 5 Light candles at your dinner table or in your place of worship to honor children waiting for adoptive homes.
- 6 Hold an art night for your children or at your parent support group meeting. Ask children to create images of family.
- 7 Visit your public library's adoption-related book collection. Suggest additional volumes they should acquire.
- 8 Befriend a teenager who is aging out of foster care—become a mentor or offer a place to go on holidays.
- 9 Write down your family's adoption story. Add it to your lifebook, submit it to a newspaper, or post it online.
- 10 Learn positive adoption language, then teach your extended family.
- 11 Make a lifebook page about your child's past year. If your child doesn't have a lifebook, make this the first page.
- 12 Create a new family tradition—attend a sporting event, take a hike, visit a science museum, or eat a special dinner.
- 13 Let a media outlet know that you appreciate its past attention to adoption and look forward to continued coverage of the issue.
- 14 Rent a video or read a book that spurs discussion about the meaning and importance of family.
- 15 Write or visit a newly elected official to share basic information about policies that affect adoptive families.
- 16 Write a letter to your child's birth family (even if you can not send it). Let your child contribute questions, sentiments, artwork, and photographs.
- 17 Take an annual family photo. Reflect as you compare it to previous photos and guess about what the coming year may bring.
- 18 Invite a fellow adoptive or foster family whom you don't know well to dinner. Consider getting to know a family whose adoption story is markedly different from your own (for example, if you adopted from foster care, get to know an international adopter).
- 19 With permission from your child, visit his or her classroom to make a presentation about adoption.
- 20 Give a teenager in foster care a gift certificate for a hair cut, new shoes, night at the movies, or tickets to a sporting event.
- 21 Spend an hour surfing adoption sites on the Internet. Download useful information for your parent group or child's teacher.
- 22 Adopt a cat, dog, hamster, fish, or plant. Teach your children that living things need care and nurturing to help them grow.
- 23 With your children's help, make cards for extended family members, letting them know that during Adoption Month you celebrate their role in your family.
- 24 Buy holiday gifts for foster children who are waiting for an adoptive family.
- 25 Send a letter of appreciation to someone who has supported your family through or after the adoption process.
- 26 Ask your faith community leader to hold a special service in honor of children.
- 27 Host an adoption orientation at your home. Invite family and friends who would make good parents to listen to a presentation by agency staff.
- 28 Call a family who is waiting for an adoptive placement to let them know that you remember the challenge of waiting and are thinking of them.
- 29 Ask your agency if you can send holiday cards to foster children during December.
- 30 End Adoption Month by reflecting with your family on all that you've done to celebrate, and making plans to continue your observances throughout the year.

**Election Day**, the Tuesday after the first Monday of November. Vote for candidates and ballot measures that help children and families. Ask others to do the same.

**Veteran's Day**, November 11. Ask a foster child or adoptee who is a veteran of the system to share ideas for change through a visit to lawmakers.

**National Adoption Day**, typically the third Saturday of November.

Complete your child's adoption at a mass finalization ceremony, or volunteer to inflate balloons, donate teddy bears, or supply refreshments at such an event.

**Thanksgiving**, the fourth Thursday of November. Give thanks for your family. At the dinner table, give each family member a turn to mention what they are most thankful for.

**The day after Thanksgiving**. On the busiest shopping day of the year, fundraise for your parent group or agency by wrapping gifts for donations at a mall. With each package, hand out adoption information.

- ☞ Find books and films that celebrate your child's community of origin. Educate yourself about common stereotypes so you can evaluate children's materials. Teach children the difference between fair images and images that can hurt people's feelings.
- ☞ Consider your child's grooming needs. Take your child to an ethnic barber or beauty salon where you can discuss popular hair styles and appropriate skin and nail care.
- ☞ Prepare special foods from your child's culture of origin. Have a meal at home or sponsor an ethnic food festival for your child's class.
- ☞ Let children know that unjust things can be changed. Encourage children to challenge bias intellectually and give them skills appropriate for their age level. Set an example by your own actions. Intervene when children engage in discriminatory bias directed against themselves and others.
- ☞ Listen respectfully to children's questions about themselves and others, what they want to know, and what they are feeling. Your personal feelings about children's questions can have as much impact as the words you use to answer. Answer questions in a direct, matter-of-fact manner that gets straight to the point. Do not ignore questions or change the subject. If you do not have an answer, say so, and look into it. Children appreciate knowing that their inquiries are important enough to you that you will remember them and return with answers later.

## Lifebooks

Adoption Month is a great time to begin or continue work on your children's lifebooks. Lifebooks, through a combination of pictures and words, document children's histories and trace their paths into adoptive families. Lifebooks capture memories that might otherwise be lost and can be a useful tool to facilitate discussions with children about adoption. Adoptive parents, foster parents, or social workers can complete lifebooks—although the most successful ones include input from all three. No matter when

children were adopted and no matter how little information is available about their lives prior to adoption, lifebooks are still worthwhile projects.

### *Reasons to Make Lifebooks*

Throughout the adoptee's life, he or she will hear about the day she arrived into the family. Stories abound from that point. The child's birth and birth family are rarely discussed because the new family members lack the personal knowledge of the birth family's story. The lifebook helps to fill that void. Lifebooks provide:

- ☞ A concrete tool for meaningful conversation;
- ☞ An adoption security blanket;
- ☞ A prop to use as part of attachment rituals;
- ☞ A structure to use when discussing difficult subjects (such as reasons for relinquishment);
- ☞ A way to normalize adoption language;
- ☞ A way to reduce fantasies about birth parents;
- ☞ A method of embedding positive messages during childhood that will be remembered during adolescence;
- ☞ An opportunity to create self-esteem and positive ethnic identity;
- ☞ A method of reducing children's divided loyalties between birth and adoptive families; and
- ☞ A space to document future events.

*We need love and creative imagination to do constructive work.*

—Paula Ollendorf

### *How to Proceed*

Be prepared for the possibility that older children may experience behavioral regression (behavior associated with younger ages) while working on their lifebooks. If the child has a traumatic history, lifebook work should be done in conjunction with seeing a competent therapist who can help integrate the child's losses and assist emotionally. When creating the lifebook:

- ☞ Tell the truth. Believe that any adoptee will cherish their life story, no matter how complicated.
- ☞ Make short, colorful pages.

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- ☞ Start with the adoptee's birth, not the arrival day.
- ☞ Avoid turning the book into an adoptive parent's journal. Focus on facts about and of interest to the child.
- ☞ Include a strong visual focus for each page—photographs, documents, children's art, or magazine clippings.
- ☞ Use action words and dialogue.
- ☞ Be funny.
- ☞ Forget about grammar and don't get stuck trying to create the perfect lifebook.
- ☞ Brainstorm and consult with peers and friends to keep the ideas flowing.
- ☞ Give yourself a deadline for completing the book. Be generous, but don't give up or tell yourself you'll write it when you have more time—the time is now.
- ☞ Always make copies of the lifebook.

## What to Include

When creating a lifebook, consider including the following pages:

- ☞ **Title page**—Use the child's picture to begin the lifebook. Let the child pick the photo, if possible.
- ☞ **Birthday page**—Describe the season of the child's birth and include typical activities or favorite family events. Then mention that the child's date of birth was a special day because he or she entered the world. Share whatever you know about the child's birth, even if information is scant. Include the child's place and time of birth, birth weight, physical health at birth, name (including meaning, especially if the name is in another language), and birth certificate or other official documents. Be certain to explain the social



## In Depth

### Thoughts about Using Lifebooks

My mother is a social worker who now uses lifebooks in her work. I wish lifebooks were available 22 years ago. Maybe I wouldn't have so many unanswered questions.

—Adult adoptee, now a social worker

Joe's mom had died in a fire. He came to live with me at age seven and stayed until he was 12. I always make lifebooks for my kids. I made a point to get photos of his mother from his maternal grandmother before she died. These were the only pictures he had of his mother. Some tough problems arose and Joe left quickly when he hit adolescence—in a huff, angry, refusing his lifebook or even a picture of his mother. So I held onto it. For seven years to be exact. Joe finally returned and was ready for his lifebook. He was 22 and getting married and having a baby.

—Foster father

My five-year-old son knows the words in his lifebook by heart. As he becomes older and can comprehend more, the words will take on a new meaning. He will never have to "be told" and will always know that it's not his fault.

—Adoptive mother

I took three-year-old David for a visit with his birth mother while she was incarcerated. Shortly thereafter she was released, overdosed, and died. So I learned a lesson. At the next visit with a different child I took pictures. His birth mother also died abruptly, but Sam will know what she looked like.

—Foster/adoptive mother

Lifebooks remain important to my children. They show that their biological connections are still important; they will never be forgotten.

—Foster/adoptive mother



If anyone had bad luck it was Sam. He had close to 10 placements in his 12 years of life, [including] several disruptions not related to him. One adoptive father died, while another committed suicide. He had nine older siblings living all over the state. I was nervous about doing his lifebook—wondering if it would make things worse—but knew how much he needed it. After reading his long lifebook, Sam asked, "Is that it? That's not so bad." Putting it all down on paper made it so much more manageable for him.

—Social worker

My daughter's lifebook only brought us closer and increased her trust in me.

—Adoptive mom

and legal reasons for the modified birth certificate—otherwise an adoptee can be confused to see adoptive parents' names on the birth certificate.

☞ **Birth parent pages**—Explain that it takes two people to make a baby—both a birth mother and a birth father. Fill the next several pages with birth parent information. Share whatever knowledge you have, and don't forget or wait to talk about birth fathers. Your goal is to instill favorable images and ideas of the birth family. Imagine that some of your child's strengths and talents might be related to what the birth parents were like. See positive connections to the past and weave together both pieces of their lives. Use actual pictures if available. If not, choose graphics carefully. If you use pictures of people, this is how your child will recall his or her birth parents. Better to let the child draw a picture than to instill false images. Always write down the nationality of the birth parents.

☞ **Birth country page**—If the child was adopted internationally, include interesting information about the child's birth country. Think about child-friendly facts, such as the food, games, clothes, animals, and music that make the country unique. For an older child, include a page of the child's own thoughts about his or her birth country.

☞ **"Why was I placed/adopted?" page**—Tell the child the truth about why he or she isn't with the birth parents. Emphasize adult responsibility—children tend to think that somehow things are their fault. Also,

if it's true, explain that the birth parents couldn't care for any child, not just your child individually. This information can boost self-esteem and combat negative thinking. A major problem such as war, not enough food, or drug and alcohol addiction is much easier to understand than a vague, "Your birth parents couldn't take care of you." Adoption will make much more sense to a child who has concrete explanations for placement.

☞ **Foster home/orphanage pages**—Include each previous place that the child lived, even if a placement was only for a day. Give as much detail as possible. Try to include foster parents' and staff members' names, photographs, and their quotes about the child. Also try to find out any nicknames, activities, hobbies, pets, foods, neighbors, schools, family members, cooking smells, foster siblings, religious activities, household rituals, discipline approaches, or sounds that were part of life at a particular placement.

☞ **Planning page**—Name the adoption agency and social worker involved. Talk about signing papers, if the plan was voluntary, or the role of the judge if there was court involvement.

☞ **Coming home**—Finally, tell the story of the day the child joined your family and include pictures. When you create the book, leave room to add pages with future stories and family events.

*Adapted from Lifebooks: Creating a Treasure for the Adopted Child by Beth O'Malley, 2000. For more information or to order this or other publications about lifebooks, visit [www.adoptionlifebooks.com](http://www.adoptionlifebooks.com).*



## Quick & Easy

### Celebrating Adoptive Families

- Host a party, complete with cake, balloons, games, and guests to celebrate adoptive families.
- Ask parent group members or families affiliated with your agency (and their children) to gather artwork and photographs. Post them below a brightly colored title on a celebratory bulletin board mural.
- Take your family to dinner at a favorite restaurant, celebrating togetherness.

## With Other Advocates

As parents juggle the daily demands of their children, work, and homes and as professionals keep up with paperwork, clients, and crises, making time for celebration can be challenging. However, when parent groups or professionals add elements of celebration to their usual tasks or undertake a larger-scale celebratory event, their efforts often improve their satisfaction in their roles. Time invested in celebrating is never wasted. When parents and professionals feel proud and appreciated, the stressful load of their daily tasks lightens—a spirit of celebration is contagious.



### Parent Groups

To bring an element of celebration to your parent group:

- ☞ **Include a success story in each edition of your newsletter.** Celebrate accomplishments—both small and large—such as a child’s progress in school, a family’s finalization of an adoption, a child’s improvement following therapy or residential treatment, or a parent’s anniversary of several years as a support group member.
- ☞ **Honor a family of the week or month each time the group meets.** Give that family a token of appreciation, such as a traveling trophy, a gift certificate, or an evening of respite with child care provided by other group members.

- ☞ **Have a fun-focused event.** Depart from business as usual during Adoption Month to engage in a pleasurable social activity. Host a potluck dinner, meet at a park, attend a museum or sporting event, or play a game.
- ☞ **Set aside a few minutes at the beginning of each meeting to give thanks for your children.** Allow parents in the group to volunteer brief stories or reasons from the last month illustrating why they celebrate their children.



### In Depth

#### Ice Skaters Celebrate Adoption

To celebrate Adoption Month and adoptive families in their state, every year the Iowa Foster and Adoptive Parents Association (IFAPA) holds an ice-skating event on the second weekend in November at a rink outside Des Moines. The event is open to all parents who have adopted through the Iowa Department of Human Services and their families. Magic shows, free pizza, and face painting help complete the event.

For the celebration, the ice arena donates the ice time and charges a much-reduced one dollar rental fee for

each pair of skates—which IFAPA covers for all attendees. IFAPA also receives donated or low-priced food from vendors at the arena. Last year’s event included a visit from members of a youth hockey team, who helped children learn to skate [see photo, inset] and handed out signed posters of a local semi-professional hockey team. Although the event centers around skating, it includes other activities that encourage families to socialize and have fun celebrating with others who are touched by adoption.



In its fifth year, the event is a success, attracting more than 230 skaters in 2000. IFAPA organized the ice-skating event in conjunction with other Adoption Month activities, including a proclamation ceremony with the governor and an awareness-raising campaign involving distribution of fact sheets about adoption along with employee paychecks.



## Professionals

Professionals can also use Adoption Month as a time to increase the amount of celebration in their work:

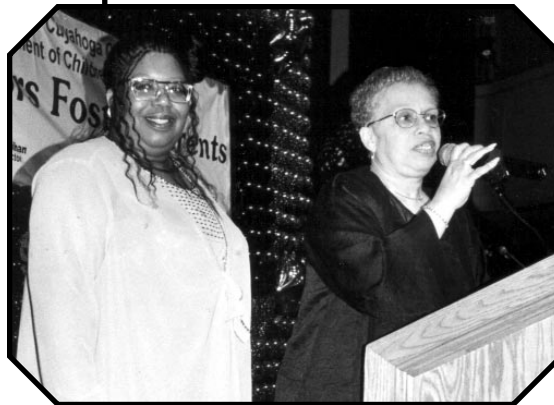
- ☞ **Hold a simple rite of passage ceremony with your families upon placement or finalization (or both).** Light a candle, plan a brief reading or recite a poem, ask the family members to say a few words, create and sign a certificate of accomplishment, take a photograph, offer refreshments, and give a small gift or memento.
- ☞ **Appreciate all that foster and adoptive families do.** Send thank-you notes or small gifts to recognize them during Adoption Month.
- ☞ **Recall important dates in the lives of the families you work with.** Create a calendar or database to help you. Each month, send cards to celebrate birthdays, anniversaries of placements or finalizations, school graduations, or other important days.
- ☞ **Display photos.** Decorate your office with pictures of the families you work with to remind yourself and all who enter why you do the work you do.
- ☞ **Plan an appreciation event for families.** Provide a dinner, massage, or outing to relax and entertain them.
- ☞ **Select a worker, family, or public official (or all three) to honor at a recognition dinner or event.** The event will raise morale and provide an opportunity for networking.
- ☞ **Recognize the efforts of adoption advocates, workers, and others in the adoption community.** Organize a reunion of advocates or social workers and children whom they helped to place in adoptive homes. Time the reunion to coincide with a worker's retirement or an anniversary date (an agency's 25th anniversary, a parent group's 10th year of offering support to adoptive families, etc.).



## In Depth

### Parents Appreciated at Event

Being a foster or adoptive parent can be challenging even as it brings joys and good times. To recognize and appreciate adoptive and foster parents, Ohio's Cuyahoga County Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) hosts an annual dinner during Adoption Month. According to Joyce Wadlington, Chief of the Recruiting Department and Foster Care, Cuyahoga County works to give adoptive parents a relaxing night of entertainment and elegance.



"These parents need to be able to get dressed up, go out for a night, and be recognized once in a while—and have someone else foot the bill," Wadlington says. "The event is continually successful because adoptive parents appreciate being appreciated for what they do."

The event involves dinner in an upscale setting, dancing, music, and prizes (including furniture and a car), all of which were generously donated by private organizations. Parents who have made outstanding contributions during the year, including both the former and newly elected presidents of the foster care association, receive individual awards [see photo of the newly elected and former presidents, inset].

Last year, DCFS also used the appreciation dinner as a recruitment strategy. At the suggestion of Paul Anderson, a consultant contracted through a private communications firm to help with the event, DCFS included a form with the dinner invitations asking parents for three names and telephone numbers of other potential foster and adoptive parents. The slips were then used as raffle tickets in a drawing for a television.

"I worked from an idea used in sales," Anderson says, "that when you have a group of people satisfied with a product or service, and they are being recognized and appreciated, you ask them for referrals. It is much like generating a greater customer base for business."

Wadlington agrees with Anderson's approach. "No amount of media advertisements or coverage," she notes, "can get families like families get families. Almost all the referrals for new foster and adoptive parents I receive come from other parents."

Through the 300 parents who attended the event, DCFS generated about 230 referrals and followed up on the names within a few months. After omitting uninterested and unreachable referrals, DCFS recruitment staff mailed 135 packets to prospective foster and adoptive parents who were responsive during follow-up telephone conversations. According to Wadlington, of those who received packets, 48 families are currently in pre-service training.