

Speaking Positively: Using Respectful Adoption Language

By Patricia Irwin Johnston

Respectful Adoption Language (RAL) is vocabulary about adoption which has been chosen to reflect maximum respect, dignity, responsibility and objectivity about the decisions made by birthparents and adoptive parents in discussing the family planning decisions they have made for children who have been adopted. First introduced by Minneapolis social worker Marietta Spencer as positive adoption language or constructive adoption language and evolving over the past 20 years, the use of RAL helps to eliminate the emotional overcharging which for many years has served to perpetuate a societally-held myth that adoption is a second-best and lesser-than alternative for all involved—that in being part of an adoption one has somehow missed out on a “real” family experience. The use of this vocabulary acknowledges those involved in adoption as thoughtful and responsible people, reassigns them authority and responsibility for their actions, and, by eliminating the emotionally-charged words which sometimes lead to a subconscious feeling of competition or conflict, helps to promote understanding among members of the adoption circle.

RAL begins with the concept of family. Historically people have been considered to be members of the same family when one or more of several conditions are met: they are linked by blood (father and son,) they are linked by law (husband and wife,) they are linked by social custom (woman and her husband’s sister), they are linked by love. We don’t blink at the concept of two non-genetically-related people being members of the same family if one or more of the other criteria are met...except in adoption.

Though in adoption parent and child are linked by love and by law, the fact that they are not connected by blood has often meant that some people are unwilling to acknowledge their relationship as genuine and permanent. Thus they use qualifiers (“This is Bill’s adopted son”) in situations where they would not dream of doing so in a non-adoptive family (“This is Bill’s birth-control-failure son” or “This is Mary’s caesarean-section daughter.”) They tend not to assign a full and permanent relationship to persons related through adoption (“Do you have any children of your own?” or “Have you ever met your real mother?” or “Are they natural brothers and sisters?”) They assume that adoptive relationships are tentative (“Will the agency take him back now that you know he’s handicapped?” or “What if his real parents want him back?”)

As the concept of family changes, it is important that we consistently acknowledge that any two people who choose to spend their lives committed to one another are indeed a family. A couple who has chosen a childfree lifestyle and a single parent with children are just as much families as is a married couple who has given birth to six children.

The reality is that adoption is a method of joining a family, just as is birth. It is a method of family planning, as are birth control pills or abortion. Though the impact of adoption must be acknowledged consistently in helping a person who has been adopted or one who has made an adoption to assimilate this issue positively, adoption should not be described as a “condition.” In most articles or situations not centering on adoption (for example, during an introduction, in a news or feature story or an obituary about a business person or a celebrity) it is inappropriate to refer to the adoption at all. (An exception may be in an arrival announcement.) When it is appropriate to refer to the fact of adoption, it is correct to say “Kathy was adopted,” (referring to the way in which she arrived in her family.) Phrasing it in the present tense— “Kathy is adopted”—implies that adoption is a disability with which to cope.

Those who raise and nurture a child are his parents: his mother, father, mommy, daddy, etc. Those who conceive and give birth to a child are his *birthparents*: his *birthmother* and *birthfather*. Technically, all of us have birthparents, however not all of us live in the custody of our birthparents. But increasingly those who have chosen adoption for the children to whom they have given birth but are not parenting are asking that the terms *birthparent*, *birthmother*, and *birthfather* be used exclusively to describe those who have already made such a plan. From this perspective it would be inappropriate to label a pregnant woman dealing with an untimely pregnancy a birthparent. Before she gives birth, she is an *expectant parent*. Not until she gives birth and actually chooses adoption would she be appropriately called a *birthparent*.

In describing family relationships involving adoption it is always best to AVOID such terms as *real parent, real mother, real father, real family*—terms which imply that adoptive relationships are artificial and tentative— as well as terms such as natural parent and natural child—terms which imply that in not being genetically linked we are less than whole or that our relationships are less important than are relationships by birth. Indeed in adoption children will always have TWO “real” families: one by birth and one by adoption. Similarly, when conscientiously using RAL, one would never refer to a child as *one of your own*, which intimates that genetic relationship is stronger and more enduring and adoptive relationships tentative and temporary.

In describing the decision-making process birthparents go through in considering adoption as an option for an untimely pregnancy, it is preferred to use terms which acknowledge them to be responsible and in control of their own decisions.

In the past, it is true, birthparents often had little choice about the outcome of an out-of-wedlock pregnancy. In earlier times they did indeed surrender, relinquish, give up and even sometimes abandon their children. These emotion-laden terms, conjuring up images of babies torn from the arms of unwilling parents, are no longer valid except in those unusual cases in which a birthparent’s rights are involuntarily terminated by court action after abuse or neglect.

In an age of increasing acceptance of out-of-wedlock pregnancy and single parenthood, today’s birthparents are generally well counseled and well informed about their options, and using Respectful Adoption Language acknowledges this reality. Increasingly, as agencies take on the role of facilitator and mediator rather than lifter-of-burdens and grantor-of-children, the phrase *place for adoption* is also being questioned. The preferred RAL terms to describe birthparents’ adoption decisions are *make an adoption plan, plan an adoption* or *choose adoption* (“Linda chose adoption for her baby”) Well counseled birthparents who do not decide on adoption do not *keep* their babies (children are not possessions) but instead they *choose to parent* them (“After considering her options, Paula decided to parent her child herself.”)

The process by which families prepare themselves to become parents is often referred to as a *homestudy*. This term carries with it an old view of the process as a weeding out or judgment. Today, more and more agencies are coming to view their role as less God-like and more facilitative. The preferred positive term, then, is *parent preparation*, a process whereby agency and prospective adopters come to know one another and work toward expanding a family.

As both sets of parents consider the ways in which they may plan an adoption their choices include retaining their privacy in a *traditional* or *confidential* (not closed) adoption or they may opt to have varying degrees of ongoing contact between birthparents and adopters in a process commonly known as *open adoption*. Some adopters parent children born outside the U.S. in a style of adoption respectfully referred to as *international adoption*. The older term *foreign* has negative connotations in other uses and so is now discouraged. Similarly, adopters who choose to parent one or more older children, sibling groups, or children facing physical or emotional or mental challenges are said to be parenting *children with special needs* or *waiting children*, terms seen as potentially less damaging to the self esteem of these children than the older term *hard-to-place*.

While adoption is not a handicap, it is a life-long process. Frequently news stories refer to *reunions* between people who are related genetically but have not been raised in the same family. In most such instances these encounters do not carry with them the full spectrum of understanding that the usual use of the term reunion implies. While children adopted at an older age may indeed experience a reunion, most adoptees join their families as infants, and as such they have no common store of memories or experience such as are traditionally shared in a reunion. The more objective descriptor for a meeting between a child and the birthparents who planned his adoption (a term which neither boosts unrealistic expectations for the event nor implies a competition for loyalties between birthparents and adoptive parents) is *meeting*.

This short poem by Rita Laws first seen in *OURS: The Magazine of Adoptive Families* (now *Adoptive Families* magazine) attempts to point out humorously the impact of negative language in adoption...
Four Adoption Terms Defined

Natural child: any child who is not artificial.
Real parent: any parent who is not imaginary.
Your own child: any child who is not someone else's child.
Adopted child: a natural child, with a real parent, who is all my own.

Respectful Adoption Language, however, is very serious business. Just as in advertising we choose our words carefully to portray a positive image of the produce we endorse (selling Mustangs rather than Tortoises, New Yorkers rather than Podunkers), and in politics we take great care to use terminology seen positively by the class or group of people it describes, those of us who feel that adoption is a beautiful and healthy way to form a family and a responsible and respectable alternative to other forms of family planning, ask that you consider the language you use very carefully when speaking about those of us who are touched by adoption!

copyright 2004 by Patricia Irwin Johnston, an infertility and adoption educator, a frequent speaker, and the author of several books on infertility and adoption, including *Adopting after Infertility* and *Adoption Is a Family Affair! What Relatives and Friends Must Know*. Contact her at PatJohnston@perspectivespress.com
