

Adoption and Education

*A Guide to Understanding Adoption
For Educators in Indian schools*

Compiled by SuDatta Adoptive Families Support Group

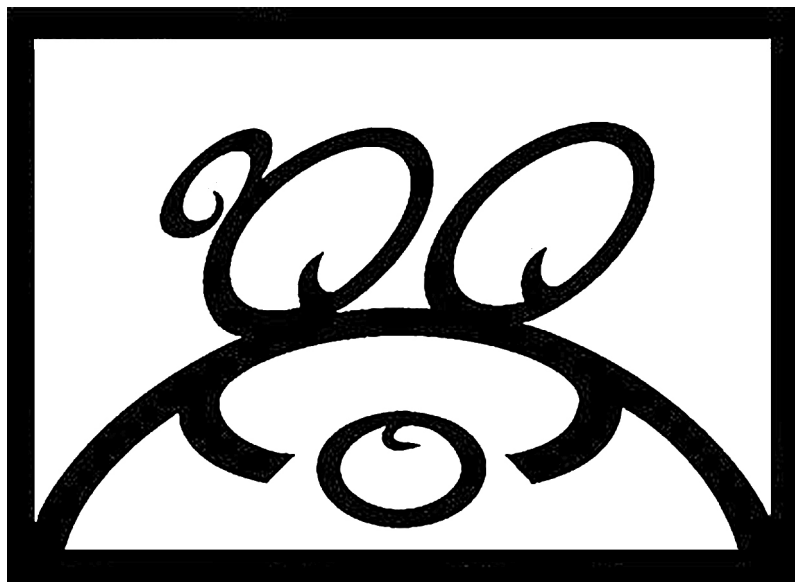


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Foreword

Dear Educator,

Family demographics in India are changing at an astonishing pace. Our definition of family is beginning to open out beyond traditional ideas. Every classroom at school is likely to have a few children from differently built families. And schools have recognised and honoured this fact while also attempting to understand the larger world their students come from.

Adoption of an unrelated child is one of the non-traditional ways of building a family. More Indians are choosing to build their families through adoption as compared to previous decades. It is heartening to note that most adoptive and other different families speak openly about their unique family structure. Parents keep up an active dialogue with their children. Where appropriate, they also talk with adults involved in their children's lives such as teachers, doctors, relatives and neighbours.

An informed and aware teacher could be better prepared to meet the student's need for support compared to a teacher who is caught by surprise. It is our strongly held belief within SuDatta that parents and educators can work in partnership in their effort to bring about inclusiveness and acceptance of differences in society.

This booklet aims to present educators with basic information about:

- non-traditional families
- adoption and practical real-life experiences from teachers and parents
- adoption-related issues that may come up in the classroom and impact the learning environment

The context of each story has not been changed and equal importance has been given to both genders while referring to the child. All identifying details, except the child's age have been altered. Positive Adoption Language has been used throughout the booklet.

Leading experts in the fields of education, psychology, counselling, adoption scrutiny and juvenile justice have offered inputs in the making of this booklet. Many adoptive parents have contributed from the richness of their learning from child rearing and conscious parenting.

Thank you for teaching our children.

SuDatta Adoptive Families Association
Bangalore, India

The Adopted Child in School
SuDatta Bangalore
Nayantara Mallya

Different Families

Diversity and difference are celebrated in schools in India. Students in a class are from different communities, religions, languages, regions, socio-economic backgrounds and now...from differently built families.

Our concept of the Indian family as *Hum do, hamare do* - mother, father and two children is slowly evolving. A point in fact is that having “only one child”, a rarity in the previous generations is now the choice of a growing number of families.

“The whole concept of what constitutes a family has been redefined” says Vijaysree Iyengar, a sociologist associated with Nirmala Niketan School of Social Work, Mumbai. “Just one parent and a child can be considered a family unit. There are so many other families that may look unorthodox, but are functional units nonetheless,” Iyengar elaborates. (Source: The Week, January 27, 2008, The New Indian Family)

Most standard Social Studies textbooks today recognise the 2 typical types of Indian families:

- A child living with Mummy and Daddy (parents by birth) - the classic **nuclear family**.
- Any number of members from the extended family joining the basic unit- grandparents, uncles, aunts, cousins etc- the grand Indian **joint family**.

But quite a few children come from families that are built of:

- Only **grandparents** raising their grand-child/children. A variant of this type of family is the granny-nanny system, where with both parents working, the grandmother is the primary caretaker for the child during the week.
- Parents in **long-distance marriages**, where the child lives with one parent or by himself with relatives or in a hostel/boarding school.
- A child of a **single parent**. A parent could be single by choice, divorce, death or absence of the spouse.
- A **step-family** created by re-marriage, where the child has a step-parent to whom he does not have a genetic relationship. The child may or may not be legally adopted by the step-parent.
- A **foster child** who lives in a foster home. The foster parents care for the child, but there is no legalised relationship, and the child may have had a series of foster homes.
- An **adopted child** who lives with his adoptive parents.

There’s diversity in adoptive families too!

- Single parents are coming forward to build their families through adoption.
- Couples who are involuntarily childless are increasingly opting for adoption.
- Couples who already have birth children expand their families by adopting one or more children.
- Though most parents adopt young babies, some opt to bring home an older child.
- Some couples stay childless by choice and then choose to adopt their child.

Adoption in India today

Nita and Harman had been married for over six years. “We had been unable to conceive a child in spite of medical support. My family knew about Nita’s and my disappointment and sadness.

One Sunday, while visiting my mother, we learnt that my elder brother’s wife was pregnant. My brother Harish already had 2 school-going children. They were hesitant to terminate the pregnancy, and after several family discussions, it was agreed that the baby would be handed over in adoption to us immediately after birth.

We were very nervous and excited at the same time. It was a very emotional time when my new daughter Simran was born. To make sure my family’s rights were protected, I made sure that the hand-over would be legalised and procured all documents as per the proper legal procedure.

My sister-in-law had mixed feelings while Nita was anxious that Harish and his wife might ‘interfere’, but they have reconciled and so have we. After all, Simran is still within the family, and everyone looks at her as our child.’

Adoption as an Indian tradition has evolved in its form, but its basic principle remains the same. Adoption is an alternative way to create a family.

- Our **Indian epics** honour the concept of adoption; grandparents tell their grandchildren Sita, Krishna, Karna, Andal and Sakuntala’s adoption stories; it was no secret in those days, neither a stigma nor a taboo.
- The **customary practice was to adopt within the family** or community. Such adoptions were not legalised, but involved strong bonding and families all the same.
- **Legalization of adoptions** addressed the need for inheritance rights and property matters. The Hindu Adoptions and Maintenance Act, (HAMA) (amended in 1960 & 1962) came into force in December 1956. Religion- based, personal laws of some communities do not permit adoptions. Non-Hindus can therefore, bring up a child as a ward under The Guardian And Wards Act, 1890.
- Though some families still adopt from their relatives, and there are many private and casual adoptions, the legal process in India involves the practice of **closed adoption** i.e. the birth parents and child have no contact or identifying information about each other.

Revathi explains how they expanded their family through adoption. “Our biological son Arnav was just about 3 and we were feeling the longings for a little baby again. Adoption had always been something we had discussed on and off. But it was a magazine article about how simple the process was that got our minds racing furiously.

We had so many doubts and fears. We got in touch with a counsellor and also some other adoptive parents and felt reassured. We hesitantly informed our parents and friends, whose reaction was mostly positive and encouraging.

The paperwork took some time, but the process was quite straightforward. We waited for 8 months after the home study, the hardest wait of our lives. One day, THE CALL came.

The moment the baby was placed in my arms, I felt just right. Arnav was jumping to hold her, and she tried to coo at my husband. Her big eyes seemed to be checking us out. She snuggled in my arms and went off to sleep, which meant to me, that she felt safe with us.

We waited another week to bring Arpita home and my family is now complete. She starts pre-school next year.”

The number of families choosing to build their families through legal adoption is steadily increasing. The **Central Adoption Resource Agency (CARA)**, New Delhi has recorded an increase in the number of children adopted within India from 2,294 in 2004 to **5,964 by Mar 2012**.

Ask anyone you know and they will tell you they have a connection to adoption. Either they themselves belong to an adoptive family, or someone in their neighbourhood, workplace, relatives or community is part of an adoptive family.

What does this mean for the educator?

There is a strong possibility that there may be an adopted child in each class, whether or not the school has been told.

To Tell the School or Not: Parents' Dilemma

Kavitha writes, "I went to admit my child to a preschool and was horrified to find a column in the admission form asking if the student is adopted. How can they ask such an intrusive question? It's my choice to tell them or not. Even though I have told my son that he was adopted, I would not wish the teachers or ayahs to know. There may be a slight difference in the way they treat him."

Since most present-day adoptions are done through the legal route, this has 2 implications for you, the teacher:

1. Parents opting for legal adoption are encouraged by adoption counsellors and agencies to be open with their child about the fact of adoption. This means that whether or not the school has been told, **the child probably knows he was adopted.**
2. Almost every adopted child has a legal birth certificate. So if the parent does not inform the school that the child was adopted, **they imagine that the school will not know.**

But... **the child may choose to share this information** with you, his teacher, or with his friends in school.

In fact, some children are so comfortable with being from a different family, that they consider it something special about themselves. What society may view as a burden or a difference, to this child is **a unique fact about himself** that he may like to share with special friends and favourite teachers.

Nikita, now a young adult, recalls, "There was one stupid classmate in 6th Std., she didn't believe I was adopted, some of my teachers actually knew it.

Yeah, I was so upset; I mean who would even lie about it. I actually took her home, I told Amma to show her the papers. I was that upset, I just wanted to convince her. With proof."

Parents' reasons for not telling the school

- They do not want to **label** their child since they are the real parents and they don't see any difference in their family.
- They fear that the educator may have **lower expectations** of the adopted child and this will prevent him from reaching his full potential.

Nikita continues, "I remember I wasn't that good in Economics in the eleventh, I'm good in Statistics... so the teacher commented to me when we were alone, 'yeah you're adopted, and that's why you couldn't perform well'. I told her, 'maybe you should talk to my mom.'"

- They worry that every issue that comes up about their child will be judged as "because he is adopted".

Suvarna, a teacher in a primary school decided to adopt a little baby girl. A few of her fellow teachers advised her against it. "Adopted children only give problems, she will not be good in studies; you're making a mistake". Nevertheless Suvarna became a mother, and 3 years later admitted her daughter to the same school.

"I felt my daughter was treated differently by her teacher, and I can't believe that the indifference had been passed on such that she had no friends in her class. The last straw was when I was called for a meeting by the teacher to inform me that Aparna had memory retention problems. I instinctively felt that the teacher was unfairly connecting her being adopted and her so-called problem."

I immediately quit my job and pulled Aparna out. I admitted her to a more child-friendly school, where she's been happy and blossoming into a confident child of her age. The new environment also knows she's adopted, but has an unbiased attitude. Looking back, I wonder if I over-reacted, but it was an agonising situation as a teacher and mother to watch my child singled out."

- In some adoptive families, **the child strongly resembles the parents**. So the parents feel that "nobody will be able to make out".
- They have **not revealed to their child** about his being adopted or they feel he has not yet understood it.
- Some parents are themselves **not comfortable** with telling the child and prefer to say that they have forgotten that the child was adopted.
- They are anxious that their child will **not be accepted** because he came to his family differently.

Reasons to keep the school informed

Namrata, a mother of a biological son and an adopted daughter explains, "The question of telling the school never arose in our case! My son had excitedly told all his teachers and classmates when we brought home his sister. In fact, Rohit's classmates were envious and most went home to tell their mothers to also bring home a sister for them!

So it was an open secret in his school, and when Rachna joined the same school, his teachers and classmates already knew how our family was built and even all the mischief she did to trouble Rohit!"

Telling the school requires parents to invest trust in the teacher. In situations where the child's performance or behaviour differs from the norm, the educator may wonder whether to assign the cause for difference to the child's being adopted.

- Some parents feel that many people already know about their child's adoptive status. They prefer the school to hear about it directly from the parents, rather than through some grapevine, or from the child himself. An advantage of telling the school, they feel, is that the educator will be positively influenced by the parents' open attitude and comfort level about the topic of adoption.
- A few parents have come to realise it's better to tell the teacher when things are going well, and not in the middle of a difficult situation concerning their child.
- Some parents choose to tell the teacher so she can be supportive to the child especially in cases where the child may have joined the family as an older child or with any known disadvantages in schooling.

Anju's story, "Abhishek came to us when he was five years old and he had only studied in a Hindi medium school earlier. We admitted him in a school with small class strengths of 12-15 students.

Nupur, his class teacher was in complete control. She made Abhishek sit next to her and talked to him in English, smiling, gesturing and play-acting. Soon the entire class of little 5-year olds was teaching him English, in English.

Nupur ma'am told us that this is the immersion method, if you immerse a child in a language, he will have no choice but to pick it up. Within one year Abhishek adapted to the new culture and being the friendly boy that he is, became the most popular boy in his class."

- Many parents feel that it is important to inform other adults involved in the child's life, such as teachers and doctors. The child spends up to 8 hours in the school environment, not to mention a couple more hours daily on school-related homework, assignments, activities etc.

Chaya's daughter Harshita had been in kindergarten for a few months. She felt an instinctive trust in Harshita's teacher and asked for an appointment with her one day. "I'd like to share something about the way my family is built," she explained to her, "Because you are such an important person in Harshita's life. Harshita joined us through adoption"

"How wonderful, Madam. My husband and I had wanted to adopt, but my mother-in-law was against it. I applaud families like yours who go ahead. Harshita is a very special girl, then."

“Madam, my reason for telling you this is not to get special treatment or extra attention for Harshita. In fact, I waited deliberately for four months before disclosing this to you, so that you could get to know Harshita as she is, a naughty, smart and active little girl, not as an adopted child. I feel that you’ll know her strengths and weaknesses now and will not judge her because of being adopted.”

“Madam, I wish parents would come forward like you, we always like to know about our students’ family background and parents’ expectations. It helps us to support the child. But parents are very closed and secretive, thinking that revealing these things means the teacher will cut marks. It’s very sad.”

Some parents appreciate that schools are beginning to give importance to a child’s home life and family situation and their impact on a child. A few preschools and schools have even added a column in their admission forms asking if the student is adopted and other details about the family. This is with the intention of informing themselves about the larger world that the child comes from.

A Principal of a school in Bangalore explains, “We have a column in our Application Form as follows:

Is your child adopted? Yes No Do not wish to disclose

We keep this information confidential. Some parents are not comfortable with disclosing this for personal reasons.

But there is an increased awareness about adoption today, sometimes the knowledge helps us to fill in a ‘missing link’ and put things in perspective.

I personally believe that it is so beautiful when parents open up their hearts and home to a child and make him or her their own. **Once this child joins school, he or she also becomes ‘our’ child.** It is important for a school to understand each and every individual child and work in tandem with the home. Sharing important factors and milestones helps us increase our understanding of the circumstances so that we can work and grow with the child accordingly.”

How the School Going Child Understands her Life Story: A Developmental Perspective

A child forms an understanding of her identity while growing up and finds out how to be comfortable with herself. ⁽¹⁾ Through a very complex process, she builds:

- **A self- concept:** This is how she sees herself
- **Self-esteem:** How much she likes what she sees of herself ⁽²⁾

Every child normally works through **cycles** in which her growing needs are satisfied. An optimal level of disappointment is helpful in **building resilience**.

The fact of adoption is an added element of a child's life story that has to be blended into her growing self concept. Whether a child was adopted as an infant or as an older child, adoption is bound to influence her development.

It has been reassuringly confirmed through many studies that when a growing child has common difficulties, **it is more due to developmental changes than due to whether or not she was adopted** ⁽¹⁰⁾. In general, children who were adopted are well within the normal range academically and emotionally.

Parents are advised to begin to **talk about adoption as early as 3 years of age**. This is for the parent to get comfortable with openness and telling the story.⁽³⁾ Some choose to tell during the primary school years. As the child grows, the **parent keeps open the dialogue about adoption, always in an age-appropriate way**.

School begins to take up a major part of her days' activities and her school experiences helps shape her self-image and her friendships. She also learns many of her values, collects most of her knowledge and works on the skills that will help her succeed as an adult ⁽¹¹⁾

It's always helpful for an educator to keep in mind that **adoption can bring up thoughts, concerns and questions in a child's mind that may influence her behaviour and academic performance**. Her teachers have a major influence on how she understands her place in the world around her.

Development of language and understanding of social concepts happen in cycles way, however, they have some major sequential stages.

Preschoolers (2-6 years)

A little child thinks very differently from adults! While adults can spell out reasons and logic (*Mama is busy and can't play*), the preschooler only observes the beginning and end points (*I spilled my milk, so Mama is angry with me*). This child cannot logically follow the intermediate points and cannot take the point of view of others i.e. egocentric thinking.

This child from about the age of two loves to pick up and repeat words. She enjoys looking at books with adults, while turning pages and pointing at pictures in the family album. **She does not fully understand adoption nor can she really comprehend the idea of "being born"'.**

Malvika writes in her blog: "We told my son Gautam about his adoption when he was pre-verbal. We made a photo-album chronicling our wedding and all developments after, including his elder (biological) sister's birth. I had no pictures of my pregnancy - adoption for us was a joint choice we made when we got married. Both my children love "the story of Manvi and Gautam" as we call it."

She also cannot imagine a time when she was not with Mama and Papa. She may search for herself in her parents' wedding album! She may parrot her adoption story, but **may not understand that her birth came first, and then her adoption.** ⁽²⁾⁽³⁾⁽⁵⁾

The way a preschooler reacts to adoption is influenced by the way her parents feel about the adoption and the way they handle it with her. **A child will be as excited about the story of her adoption as other children are by the story of their births.** Thanks to this lack of understanding, preschoolers and toddlers who were adopted as babies, rarely show adoption-related adjustment problems.

Children who were placed for adoption at an older age may remember their earlier homes, family and institutions. They might need time to adjust to the various changes in their lives while also forming attachments to their new caretakers. With time, bonds of trust are built in the family and the child starts making sense of her unique adoption story.

Anju continues, "Adopting a five year old has its challenges. Everyone in the family advised me on bonding, disciplining, how not to expect anything in return, without any of them having gone through this experience themselves. My parents had diagonally opposite opinions compared to my in-laws. I was confused, scared of going wrong, all the while dealing with the bitter-sweet feelings that go with adopting an older child.

I found myself talking to Nupur ma'am and she said something that cleared my head of all the confusion.

"Abhishek is now your child. You have taken his responsibility. And he has handed himself over to you. So the deal is primarily between the two of you. If you feel like spoiling him, give him a chocolate. If you have to discipline him, go ahead and be firm.

Be a mother. Be yourself. This is not a project. This is a relationship. It has to work one to one."

I wonder where Nupur ma'am sourced the wisdom to give me so much clarity. But, from then on, I looked at Abhishek as my son. Naturally, I share him with the rest of the family, and I even take their advice, but with a pinch of salt. A relaxed mother is a good mother."

Around the fifth year a child begins to grasp the concepts of space and time. She understands that the past is different from the present and that people and places exist outside her immediate environment.

She may wonder how she grew inside another mother's tummy. This does not immediately affect her because she is still quite secure within herself and self centered in her own world.

Primary school (6-9 years)

Malvika writes that they are prepared to be appropriately open with Gautam about everything related to adoption. "He asked me one day "Where she is, Amma - the person whose tummy I was born from?"

Another time, a 'line of questioning' emerged. After asking where his birth mother was, he said. 'But I don't want to be born from any one else's tummy....only yours'. He has begun to ask more questions about whether his birth mother was bad because she was not taking care of him. We didn't realize that questions can start this early and are hoping this is a sign that he is comfortable bringing his thoughts to us."

A six-year old child starts to understand cause-and-effect. She can reason logically about real situations without being influenced by changes in appearances (operational thinking). E.g. A small ball of chapathi dough can be flattened into a big chapati, but the quantity of dough is the same. She understands that the two states can be reversed. She becomes a problem solver.

Around age six or seven, she starts understanding reproduction. **She understands that she grew inside one woman who gave birth to her, and that she now is in a different family that nurtures her.** This gives her a better understanding about adoption and may bring up feelings of loss, sadness or anger and her perception of rejection. ⁽¹⁾⁽²⁾⁽⁷⁾⁽⁸⁾

Openness and acceptance to these realities is modelled both at home and at school.

Roopashree, a primary schoolteacher relates her experience of facilitating a group of 7 to 9 year olds in a Montessorie environment. "I was pregnant and soon my students were eyeing my growing tummy, some with interest, some with hesitation. I decided to tell my class that I was going to have a baby and I would soon be taking a few months leave.

This prompted some students to start sharing stories about being born, some recalled how their mothers had been pregnant and given birth to their siblings. At some point Sudeshna spoke up *'I have two mummies, the first one gave birth to me, and my mother now takes care of me'*. Her classmates did not blink or question her (not at that point anyway) but carried on talking about their experiences, and one child spoke about her father who was working and living abroad.

I took a few moments with the child alone to clarify and understand the information she had shared; later I expressed to her parents how much I appreciated her comfort level and steady confidence in stating this fact about herself.

Several weeks later I brought to class an ultrasound image of my (in-utero) child since my students at this stage were learning about life cycles. As they eagerly responded with observations and questions we talked about families and family compositions. We all spoke about how some children are cared for by other adults in an extended family and some are also adopted. It was another day for me with profound reflections from these young and open minds about the possible reasons why some children may not grow up with their birth parents."

Middle School (9-12 years)

A child at this age thinks even more about what being adopted means. She is trying to understand:

1. What is my role in my world?
2. How much can I control the world in which I live?

She gradually **realises that her adoption involved separation and loss** before she came into a different family that nurtures her. This may bring up feelings of sadness, resentment for having no control, anger and confusion.

At this point she realizes that most other children are living with at least one biological relative. Her self-image changes as **she realizes she is different from most of her friends**.

Self-esteem is crucial to her at this age. Any matter that makes her feel different from her classmates can be a source of worry to her. She may be bothered that her friends may think she is inferior because she was adopted.

Ruchi, 11, says, "When I tell my friends, they PITY me. That's what I don't like, they don't take us adopted kids in the normal side, they think it's bad. They think they are very normal I try to tell them nothing is different, everything is the same but it doesn't work out."

Experienced parents look back to this phase as one where they needed to listen very patiently and sensitively while reassuring and answering the many unusual

questions that pop up. 'What did my mother look like?', 'Have you met her', 'Do you think she remembers me?'

Daydreaming, fantasising and questioning during middle childhood are a part of **adaptive grieving**. They help a child to come to terms with her past. This process and feelings may recur, often as cycles of grieving that subside and re-emerge with different developmental ages and stages.

Sumathi writes, "There was a stage when there was quite a bit of rivalry between our children. Saatvik, our biological son was brilliant at Maths in the 9th standard and all out to impress his Maths teacher by doing extra sums everyday. We had just shifted to a new city and a new school.

He used to get irritated when people praised our adopted daughter Sahana's attractive looks, while she used to be annoyed with him for being smarter than her in Maths.

One day, her 7th standard friends saw her talking to Saatvik in school. 'Who is that?' they asked her. 'My brother,' Sahana replied.

'What? That is your brother? He doesn't look like you at all!' To which Sahana replied "Yes, that's because he's my adopted brother. So he looks different from me.'

She came home and told me this and begged me not to tell her brother. "Bhaiyya will feel bad, Mama." I was at first very startled. Then I realised it was her need to be a part of our family that had made her say that. Having friends and being sure of their approval has always been a priority for her. I decided it was ok to hold onto a few harmless secrets for a few years!"

Additionally the child could benefit from an encouraging school staff. One parent remembers warmly how the art teacher's appreciation of the child's talent and ample opportunities to participate in group activities had a lasting effect on her child's self esteem.

High School (13-18 years)

All teenagers, adopted or not, question everything and everyone!

Adolescence is a time of moving away from being a protected and dependant child and becoming a responsible independent adult. The teenaged child is establishing a personal identity and preoccupied with questions such as:

1. Who am I?
2. Where am I going?

She becomes more aware of her sexuality and dreams of living and working on her own, while maintaining a secure position in her family. This can lead to conflicts because of the re-organizing of roles and relationships.⁽¹⁰⁾

Normally, in early adolescence, the teenager tries to make sense of the loss of childhood. **An adopted teenager has to factor in two sets of families** and that may give rise to divided loyalties and conflict. ⁽⁷⁾

Having already gone through the loss of her birth family, the transition to adolescence may be a little more complex. The teenager might struggle with not knowing where they came from. She may also have to resolve issues of shame and low self-esteem because of society's negative attitudes towards the history of children who were adopted.

Manas, 16, adds, "Many people differentiate, that's wrong, there's no difference b/w us and any others, I mean all of us are normal. They just think we're special people or that there's something wrong with us, that's why something happened and that's why we're here. They've got the thing wrong."

Tarun, 13 : "Some think its ok."

Vaishali, 13: "Some say we're lucky."

Krutika, 17 : "They ask, do you feel weird? We're like, no."

It is only during early adolescence that the child grasps that the adoption process is permanent. **Because a teenager can think abstractly, she understands the legalities of adoption and why her birth parents placed her for adoption.** Some teens might blame adoption for all their problems; many others may not think of adoption as an important issue.

Nikita shares an incident, "One day, after our 12th standard lectures, I was nearing the school gate to return home, when my junior came up to me and curiously questioned me, 'Didi, were you adopted?'"

I just froze for a moment and my first reaction was, 'Yes, whom did you hear this from?' I was filled with anger, because on recollecting I knew that none of my juniors were aware of my adoption story. She smiled back at me and responded saying 'Rao Sir told me... he did so as I am facing some problems with my family, so he said 'look at Nikita, what a bright child and she has adjusted so very well in this family through adoption.'

At first, I was angry with Sir for betraying my confidence, I wanted to confront him. But I also trust Rao Sir completely, I know him very well. He would not have spoken about me unless there would have been a requirement. And I also didn't think he said anything wrong.

I had nothing to say more, so I just passed a smile and said 'all right'."

Many questions remain unanswered; still, the adolescent identity crisis can be made easier. For this, studies suggest that **the groundwork for acceptance**

of difference can be laid from early childhood in a natural and ongoing manner.

Some families avoid talking until the child is a teenager thinking that revealing such a fact is too traumatic on a younger child. In many of these instances they have experienced intense reactions from the child. The parents fear that the child will reject them. **The children feel their trust in their parents has been broken because until then, they were not told the truth about themselves.**

Extra family support or family counselling is needed to ease the situation and improve communications. Counsellors and other adoptive families have offered parents the language and help to engage with the child in such difficult times. Sometimes unusual behaviours being addressed by the school counsellor may become the beginning of a difficult telling in that family.

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Classroom Strategies for Students from Differently Composed Families

Certain classroom assignments, activities and situations have the potential to exclude a child from a differently made family. It's a good idea to keep in mind that families can be built in a variety of ways when planning any assignments related to:

- family-building
- birth
- reproduction and biology
- moral science and value education
- social studies
- genetics and inheritance

Lucy, a mother who adopted two children, explains, "Their teachers so far have always shown acceptance and sensitivity towards them while at the same time not showering them with any undue attention.

When our daughter Maria had to take a baby photo to class for instance, her teacher approached me to ask whether we had an appropriate photo, and how to address any questions that may come up if the other children all showed photos of themselves at a much younger age.

I explained to her that Maria may explain the situation herself if asked, and that any questions could be addressed in an honest and open manner. Interestingly, however, all the other children brought photos of themselves which were much more recent than those Maria took to class!"

The following are common class assignments that may unintentionally confuse a child from a step-family, single-parent family, adoptive family etc. Some solutions have been suggested.

Certainly **the educator is always in the best position** to come up with creative ways to include students from different families. It helps to **define the goals and scope of the assignment when devising alternatives**.

Bring your Baby Photo/Newborn Photo

Preethi adopted Juhi at the age of four. "When she was asked for her baby photo, I sent a note to the teacher that as she was adopted as an older child, we did not have her baby photos. And Juhi was quite proud to take that letter to her teacher!"

The possible exclusive bias: A child who was adopted may not have his early baby pictures, especially if he was adopted at an older age

Suggestions for inclusiveness:

- Broaden the assignment to “a photo of your younger days”
- Ask the child to draw a baby picture of himself
- Being very specific about the requirement

Vanishree did not anticipate any problems when her 4th standard daughter was asked to bring her baby photo. “We adopted Sapna when she was 3 months old, so I happily sent along her baby photo and forgot about it.

Sapna told me a few days later that 2 girls had brought pictures of their pregnant mothers, with an arrow saying ‘this is me in my mother’s tummy’. She found it quite funny, since she felt the girls had not brought exactly what the teacher had required.

This was several years back, and I wonder if students nowadays would bring their ultrasound scan images!”

Draw your Family Tree

The possible exclusive bias: The family tree printed in most textbooks has blanks for one mother and one father and their ancestors.

1. A child whose mother has divorced and re-married may wish to include both his biological father and step-father and their ancestors
2. Similarly, a child who was adopted may wish to include his birth parents, whether he knows their details or not
3. A child of a single parent may feel sad to leave one space blank.

Suggestions for inclusiveness:

- Try a Rooted Tree, birth parents have roots growing downwards, the branches can show adoptive, foster or step-parents
- The Family Bush or Garden shows family members growing side by side
- A Family Circle or Family Wheel shows birth parents in a concentric circle around the child’s name, along with another concentric circle showing foster, adoptive or step-parents
- Where names of birth parents are unknown, or it is a single parent adoptive family, the child can come up with his own names for birth parents

Write your Life Story / Draw a Timeline of your Life’s Events

The possible exclusive bias: A child from a differently composed family may or may not wish to write about events from his history such as

- His birth to his birth mother

- Being placed for adoption
- His parents' divorce
- Death of a parent
- Time spent in foster care or an orphanage or adoption agency

Suggestions for inclusiveness: Broaden the scope of the assignment to include any significant events that the child is willing or capable of writing about such as:

- Learning a new skill like swimming or riding a bike
- Moving from one city to another
- Joining a new school
- Losing baby teeth
- Going to school by himself on the bus

Trace the Genetic Inheritance of your Blood Group

The possible exclusive bias: A child in a single-parent, adoptive or step-family may not have information about his birth parents. And he may not be genetically connected to his present family.

Suggestions for inclusiveness: If the objective of this assignment is simply to gain an understanding of inheritance, students could instead chart the genetics of plants or animals.

If the human angle is important, the children could trace the genetics of historical examples, such as hemophilia in royal families. Or the teacher can put together genetic inheritance problems for the students to solve.

Alternatively, if the teacher feels the child is comfortable, he can instead trace the **possibilities** of his birth parents genetics e.g. a child with blood group AB can write that if his birth mother was type B, his birth father would have had to be type A or AB. This puts the focus on subject accuracy and understanding rather than the child's genetic origins.

Prasad was very concerned when his son Kishore, a class topper, seemed to have suddenly started hating school. "He was in tenth standard. After moping and snapping at us for weeks, he finally told us what had saddened him so.

'Science Ma'am gave us an assignment on tracing inheritance of height. I asked her softly 'What about me Ma'am? I'm adopted.'

'Ma'am just said, 'It's ok, Kishore, you don't have to do this assignment, it doesn't apply to you.' Mom, the guys in the front bench heard her.

Kishore was depressed for several months after that, his grades slipped and by the time the Board exams came around, his self-esteem had dipped so low, that he refused to take the exam.'

Tell the Story of your Family/Write your Autobiography

Anju recalls, "We shifted cities about a year after Abhishek came to us. I decided not to tell the new school that he was adopted.

Abhishek's new classteacher asked him (and others from his class) to bring photographs of his family. So Abhishek took our photographs, and in the 'presentation', he said,

'I had one mother and one father. Then my first mother died, then my first father died. Then I got a new mother and a new father.'

Simple. And true. In the evening, when I went to pick him up from the school bus, his class teacher asked me, 'Is he adopted?'

I said 'Yes.'

The possible exclusive bias: A child from a differently built family may feel "different" when he hears his classmates' stories. He may not want to talk about his family for **fear of standing out**.

Or he may be **very comfortable with his family** structure, but his speaking out in class may invite "**difficult**" questions from classmates.

Suggestions for inclusiveness: You, the teacher will be the best judge of this. Perhaps you may get a chance to consult with the child's parents (assuming you know in advance about the child's family composition)

You could

- Convert the assignment to a written one, "for your eyes only"!
- Broaden the assignment to include family pets, sport, activity or hobby interests, parents' professions etc
- You may have to be ready to step in and guide the discussion if the subject of different families comes up. This may be a great opportunity to educate your students about various kinds of families

Anita writes, When Amulya was about 5 years old, she started telling her "adoption story" enthusiastically to her classmates and teachers during an informal discussion. Her teachers, while listening to her story, were not completely at ease because of the presence of other "normal" kids. They were concerned about Amulya and other adopted children in the class because they worried the "normal" children might get

some wrong ideas about adoption and later pass comments on adopted children. Therefore they changed the topic and ended the matter there.

I wondered if my daughter felt puzzled over why her teachers changed the topic or did not let her complete her story. More so, because we have been telling her all the time that it is perfectly normal to raise a family through adoption. As an adoptive mother I know for a fact that my daughter is extra sensitive to her surroundings.'

Some More Strategies

If you need to handle a sensitive topic like adoption or alternative ways of building a family, these tactics may be helpful:

- Using Positive Adoption Language
- Maintaining boundaries of privacy by talking generally and not specifically
- Responding calmly to inappropriate or insensitive questions or comments.
- Keeping an age-appropriate focus and goals
- Planning your answers in advance to questions you think may come up, such as 'Why did her mother give her away?', 'Is he her real brother?' etc

A Note on Sex Education

Ruksana relates the following challenge her daughter Shabana faced in school during a sex education talk in the eighth standard. "The lecture had finished and the students were chatting among themselves about the cute babies in the video. One of Shabana's friends, who knew Shabana was adopted said 'You know Shabana, you could have been the product of a rape or even a prostitute's daughter'

Shabana started weeping, and though her teacher tried to console her, it took her many months to recover from the shock of that one careless statement. I know this could have happened even outside school, but I often find myself wishing the teacher had handled it more firmly"

Adopted children need to feel a sense of value about themselves and some may feel stigmatised by their background circumstances.

Moral Science and Value Education

Srikanth's son Naveen has always been very comfortable and upfront about having been adopted. "Once in his second standard Moral Science class, a sentence from his textbook puzzled him. 'Good parents always take care of and love their children.'

Naveen actually stood up in the class when the teacher read this out, and said 'My parents had me and they loved me, but they could not take care of me. They gave me to

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SuDatta Bangalore
Nayantara Mallya

other parents for adoption. So I have 4 parents who love me, but only two take care of me.' The teacher said okay and Naveen sat down.

As families evolve and become more diverse, it's possible that you, the educator may be challenged by your student on some statements that come up in textbooks or the curriculum as a matter of course. You may also get **surprising answers to some questions!**

Venkatesh, recalls a page in his son's 2nd standard moral science workbook. "It was a chapter where the students had to write various things about themselves, what they liked to do, wear, eat etc. And there was a section where a Fill-in-the-Blanks question was 'I am special because.....'

Others wrote things like 'because I am pretty', 'because I am obedient', 'because I help my mother'. Varun wrote, 'because I am adopted'. I do not know what the teacher thought when she was correcting it. After all she had 50 students in the class!"

Children may pick up subtle tones in an adult's voice; they could notice if you are **unsure or uncomfortable talking about adoption-related subjects and differently built families**. When you are explaining these concepts, children need to feel the acceptance of adoption as a valid and wonderful way to build a family.

Listen Carefully to Students' Questions

Children have a different understanding and perception of adoption at different ages, which evolves as they grow and develop. When a student, adopted or not, asks a question, it's a good idea to give him a chance to **clarify the question**. This may help you, the educator, to identify the information to be given in answer to the child.

Sujata, a geography teacher in a Bangalore primary school, was doing a project with her 3rd standard students. "I had divided the class into groups of students to work on a small class task on marking out cities in Indian states. Arya was the leader for the Karnataka group. When he came to report progress to me, he asked me, 'Ma'am where is Sanaya from?'

I knew that Sanaya was an adopted child, and I wasn't sure if her classmates knew it. I wondered what to reply. I didn't think it was appropriate to start talking about her origins. Then I casually asked Arya, 'What do you mean, Arya?'

'I was just wondering where she was born. I know my friends are mostly born in Bangalore itself.'

I knew that Sanaya's parents had adopted her from a Bangalore agency. So I said, 'Sanaya's from Bangalore too, Arya', and waited for more questions. He didn't ask anymore and we continued with our project."

Some open-ended questions that you could ask when you're not sure exactly what a child wants to know:

- What do you mean?
- Is that what you think?
- How come you're asking that?

Questions and Remarks from Other Students

Schools generally have **policies on handling behaviours that may physically or emotionally hurt a student**. These include bullying and name-calling, racial, communal or religious slurs and teasing about different looks or abilities.

Remarks about family origins may also be intensely hurtful to a child who comes from a differently built family. They need to be handled with firmness in accordance with the school's policy.

Srilata remembers a fight her daughter Neha had with a classmate Vijaya in the fifth standard. "They were loudly arguing and blaming each other. The teacher was slightly late to class. When she came in, of course everyone started telling her who started it and what was going on.

Meanwhile these two were still quarrelling. Vijaya ended it when she said 'Anyway I know you have bad blood, that's why you're no good.' Neha was humiliated and the teacher, who knew she was adopted, consoled her. But she did not address the name-calling by the other girl. Perhaps she did not know how such a comment could hurt an adopted child."

Similarly, a child from a differently built family may need a little back-up from his teacher when he is asked **intrusive questions about his family structure**. Some children are confident enough to handle it on their own.

Divyashree, a single adoptive parent has always talked openly with her daughter about their uniquely built family. She was rather amused when Keerthana, then in the 4th standard, came home one day with a satisfied look.

'Amma, you know that boy Chirag, he always troubles me and my friends a lot. He has been making fun of me a lot. Today he was saying 'Keerthana's father never comes to school. Only her mummy keeps coming for the PTA meetings. Where's your father?'

I just told him 'It's none of your business. At least my mother cares for me and comes to talk to Ma'am. Why are you asking?' Amma, he did not know what to say after that.'

I was awed that my daughter had handled it herself without getting too bothered.

Adoption can come up in the Curriculum

Divyashree continues, “My daughter Keerthana, in her 5th standard in the Karnataka State Board, has a lesson on Kittur Rani Chennamma. It includes a sentence ‘They did not have any child of their own so she and her husband Mallasurja adopted a son, who was not recognised by the British who took advantage. ...’

And there was a later question too ‘Why did Kittur Rani Chennamma adopt a child?’ I was revising the chapter with her and thought it was a great opportunity to chat about adoption with Keerthana and started explaining to her.

Though she knows I adopted her, she firmly replied 'But I am from your stomach only'.”

It’s not uncommon to find references to adoption in textbooks. One of the most effective methods of normalizing adoptive families is to **merge information into standard lessons and class dialogues**.

Nagaraj remembers when his son gave a correct answer in class. ‘It was an English class test, and the question was a Match-the-Following type. It said ‘Couples who have no children ...’

Manoj was the only one in the class who matched the correct answer ‘...can adopt a child’”

Positive Adoption Language

Remember the saying we learnt in school, “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me”. Wrong. **Language has the power to hurt or heal.**

Using Positive Adoption Language helps a child feel good about who she is, and her journey from where she was to how she is now. It helps her **honour both her past and her present.**

Positive Adoption Language (PAL) was introduced by Marietta Spencer a Minneapolis Social worker in the 1970s. It has been publicised further by adoption educator Patricia Irwin Johnston.

It’s helpful to remember that adoption always involves a sense of loss for the child. She may (occasionally or often) think of the parents who conceived him, but could not bring him up. This may bring up (mild to extreme) feelings of confusion, sadness, anger and grief.

When we use insensitive language to talk about this aspect of her history, it hurts her to her very core. Let’s think and speak positively about the 3 stakeholders involved in the adoption circle:

- Birth parents
- Adoptive parents
- The child

It’s important to recognise that most people do not use the “wrong” terms deliberately. All the same, **thinking before speaking** is usually all that’s needed to say the right words.

There are 2 aspects to Positive Adoption Language or PAL. We can use it to describe

1. The child’s family and relationships
2. The actual adoption process

While the following suggestions are for English, it’s quite easy to think of alternative terms we can use in our vernacular Indian languages.

The Family

When we want to say...	We can instead choose to say...	The logic
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Real parents	Birth or biological parents	Birth parents and adoptive parents are both real and not imaginary!
Natural mother	Birth or biological mother, woman who gave birth to	Blood ties do not make parenting more or less natural
Natural child	Birth child, biological child	A child is never unnatural or artificial!
Own child (as opposed to adopted child)	Birth child	Our children are our own, whether birth, adopted, foster or step-.
Adoptive mother/father	Mother, Amma, Mom, Mummy, Ma, Father, Daddy, Dad, Papa, Appa, Pitha	It's better to use 'adopted' or 'adoptive' only where circumstances require it
Adopted child	Child	Same as above

- It makes more sense to say “She was adopted” rather than “She is adopted”. Adoption is not a disability; it's simply a way of building a family. The legal process of adoption was a one-time event. It need not be a lifetime label for the child.
- It's not necessary to always refer to the child, the parents, or indeed the entire family as adopted or adoptive. The child belongs to her family; it's a bonding beyond the umbilical cord.
- Though we may do it unintentionally, referring to her birth parents disrespectfully and condemning their choices affects her directly. The secrecy and taboo that surround the subject of adoption are harmful to the child's self-esteem. Her past is a part of who she is.

The Process

When we want to say...	We can instead choose to say...	The logic
Illegitimate	Born to unmarried parents	The birth parents' marital status does not reflect on the child
Unwed/unmarried mother	Birth mother	Ditto
Gave away, gave up, surrendered, abandoned,	Chose adoption, placed for adoption,	A birth mother loves and wants her child, but

put up for adoption, relinquished an unwanted child	made adoption plans, planned for her future	makes the difficult choice of having another family raise him or her. We can judge her circumstances, not her personally
Keep the baby	Parent the baby	A child needs parenting. She is not an object that we “keep” or “give away”.
Adopt-a-street, adopt-a-village, adopt-a-cause	Sponsor-a-street, befriend, support, fund	Monetary or other aid to a program misuses the word ‘adopt’. Child adoption is a way of building a family
Adopt a resolution, adopt an attitude/principle/lifestyle	Pass/implement a resolution, take up/embrace a lifestyle etc	Here adopt means “make one’s own”. It’s still different from a child making a family her own
Give a child a home, the child is lucky to be adopted	Bring home our child, expand our family through adoption	When we use ‘give’ and ‘luck’, it creates an unfair expectation of gratitude from the child. The child is enriching her home and family
Adoption is a noble deed, a social service, a cause	Adoption is a wonderful way to build a family	Same as above
The child was chosen by her parents	The parents chose to expand their family through adoption	Same as above. Being called ‘chosen’ puts a lot of pressure on a child

Further Resources (web and print)

Books for Children (for the School Library)

- What is Adoption? Helping non-adopted children understand adoption
by Sofie Stergianis and Rita McDowall
- Twice-Upon-A-Time: Born and Adopted
by Eleanora Patterson
- Did My First Mother Love Me? A Story for an Adopted Child
by Kathryn Ann Miller
- Lucy's Family Tree
by Karen Halvorsen Schreck
- Let's Talk About It : Adoption
By Fred Rogers.
- Tell Me Again : About the Night I Was Born
by Jamie Lee Curtis

Booklet Bibliography

- Adoption Basics for Educators: How Adoption Impacts Children and How Educators Can Help <http://www.ifapa.org/Brochures/adoption.pdf>
- http://www.csa.org.in/adoption_1.html
- Vinita Bhargava. Adoption in India: Policies and Experiences. Sage Publications India. 2005
- Telling the teachers: Adoption and School <http://www.adopting.org/adoptions/telling-the-teachers-adoption-and-school.html>
- Adopted children in the early childhood classroom
<http://www.adopting.org/uni/frame.php?url=http://www.kidsource.com/education/adoptchild.early.ed.html>
- Centre for Adoption and Support Education
<http://www.adoptionsupport.org/pub/docs/IntheChildren05copyright.pdf>
- Creating a classroom for adopted and non-adopted children
<http://voicesofadoption.rainbowkids.com/ArticleDetails.aspx?id=43>
- Teacher's Guide to Adoption *2nd ed., 2005* By Robin Hilborn
<http://www.adopting.org/uni/frame.php?url=http://www.familyhelper.net/ad/adteach.html>
- Speaking Positively: An Information Sheet about Adoption Language and Adopt-a-Confusion, by Pat Johnston, Perspectives Press, Box 90318, Indianapolis IN 46290-0318, 317-872-3055, www.perspectivespress.com