

A BRIEF HISTORY OF ADOPTION AND PERMANENCY IN OUR CULTURE

For as long as there have been parents and children, there have been parents who were unable to care for their children, and children who needed permanent families. These needs were often met through both formal and informal arrangements. Relatives and tight-knit communities have been absorbing children into family units through informal arrangements for centuries. Formal adoptions of children by unrelated adults are a more recent phenomenon, and have historically been fraught with secrecy until quite recently. Openness in formal adoption is a relatively new concept.

Adoption advocate Adam Pertman, in his book *Adoption Nation*, provides a comprehensive history of adoption practices in the U.S., highlighting the current broader sociocultural context for adoption. Pertman states that adoption is now “out of the closet” and in fact, it has been coming out of the closet since the 1970s. This is an excellent book to read to get an overview of the history of adoption and permanency.

The commonly used phrase, “put up for adoption” originated with the first orphan trains of the late 19th century. These orphan trains were started when a Catholic Priest in New York City sought to find homes for the thousands of children left orphaned during the Industrial Revolution, many living on the streets. Many of these young children were begging and stealing to feed themselves and siblings, often being scooped up by law enforcement and sent to jail with the adult population. These street children were rounded up and placed on trains that took them out west to find families willing to take care of them, often in exchange for work the child could perform. The children were literally “put up” on train station platforms where potential parents could view them and choose those hearty enough for the work and best suited to the family.

At the turn of the century and well beyond, children born to unwed mothers had the word “bastard” stamped on their birth certificates. For decades, social welfare workers, in an effort to protect children from this stigma, told parents who had adopted children not to tell them the true origins of their birth. The message was one of shame. Birth fathers’ rights were not addressed and birth mothers were told they could simply start their lives over again. Many adopted children were never told the origins of their birth, often learning they were adopted when adoptive parents died and they discovered legal documentation of their adoption or original birth certificates.

By the 1950s, adoption research was beginning to emphasize the importance of accepting differences as a critical factor in successful adoptive families, and the institution of adoption began to change. The movement in the 1950s and 1960s of American families adopting children from other countries, especially Korea and Vietnam, underscored the growing diversity of the adoptive family. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, a consumer’s rights perspective led to a movement for adoption reform. The number of children in the child welfare system for whom adoption was considered increased, and federal and state subsidies encouraged the adoption of children with “special needs.” In the 1970s, the focus on moving children from the child welfare system into adoptive families, and the changes in societal values, led the way for transracial and transcultural placements, primarily of African American children into



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Caucasian families. Continuing changes in our social culture have resulted in the fact that now families built by adoption and other forms of permanency reflect the same diversity as families throughout the United States.

Societal views of adoption and permanency shape the experience of those who are part of the adoption constellation. Understanding the historical and cultural context of adoption in our country provides insight into those societal views. It also helps us see how the language of adoption has evolved along with our society's changing perceptions, and how we can influence change through the words we choose. Simply taking the time to correct the phrase "given up for adoption" to "made an adoption plan" can be an important step in moving away from a culture of shame and secrecy.

The concept of permanency further broadens our perspective to include arrangements other than adoption, so long as the child has an adult committed to him for a lifetime. We are coming full circle to accept both formal and informal arrangements as valuable to the child. We have more knowledge today about how permanency impacts child development than was known anytime during the past century, and we now understand that it is the permanent connection, whatever the legal status is called, that makes the difference.