



# ADOPTIVE FAMILIES

CLIP-AND-SAVE GUIDE

## How to Be an Adoption Advocate

Road-Tested Tips for Families

BY KATHERINE MIKKELSON

**A**s an attorney, I used to advocate for my clients. But when I left work at the end of the day, my cases and my lawyering skills stayed at the office. A few years ago, however—about the time Zack, my oldest, entered preschool—I noticed that my professional skills had crossed over into my dealings with friends, neighbors, and others in the community. I was becoming an adoption advocate.

You don't have to be an adoption professional to take on this role. Every time you educate or enlighten someone, you are advocating adoption.

Think of adoption advocacy as a slow, evolving process rather than a list of projects that you should tackle all at once. First-time parents may be so swamped that they can only think about the next feeding and diaper change. Take your time and do only what feels comfortable for you and your family. I'm guessing that, if you're like me, the longer you're an adoptive parent, the more you'll want to persuade the world that adoption is a wonderful way to build a family.



## POSITIVE ADOPTION LANGUAGE

◆ **USE APPROPRIATE LANGUAGE AND GENTLY CORRECT THOSE WHO DON'T.** When a store clerk asks, "Where's his natural mom?" respond with "Do you mean his birthmother?" When your prying neighbor asks, "Why was she given up for adoption?" respond that your child's birthparents made an adoption plan knowing that was the best option for her. You don't have to chastise anyone for their incorrect terminology, but you will notice that others will begin to copy the terms you use.

◆ **MAKE CORRECTIONS TO FORMS THAT USE INAPPROPRIATE TERMS.** When I was petitioning the court for Zack's adoption in 1997, our adoption agency gave us sample pleadings that we could adapt and file with the court. The samples contained the terms "natural mother and father." When I asked our agency about it, they told me that the court in this particular jurisdiction was very traditional and still used such terms. Not settling for "its-always-been-done-this-way," I changed all of the terms to read to "birthmother and -father." And do you know what? The judge signed the final order of adoption with my modifications. You can emend medical or school information forms—or any other document crying out for an update—in much the same way.

◆ **WRITE A LETTER TO THE EDITOR ABOUT INAPPROPRIATE TERMS** used in print, and consider sending along the adoption stylebook created by the Accurate Adoption Reporting group. This stylebook contains guidelines and appropriate language for journalists to follow when writing about adoption issues. You'll find it in *Adoptive Families* Jan/Feb 02, [www.adoptivefamilies.com/articles.php?aid=405](http://www.adoptivefamilies.com/articles.php?aid=405).

### Lobby Your Employer for Adoption Benefits

Adoptive parents should have the same benefits as parents who give birth. If your employer does not have equitable leave benefits or reimbursement for adoption fees, write a letter to the CEO or president urging changes to your company's policy. Not much of a writer? For a sample letter you can use as a model, check out Betsy Mair's article, "How to Lobby Your Employer for Adoption Benefits" (*AF* May/June 00, [www.adoptivefamilies.com/pdf/employment\\_benefits.pdf](http://www.adoptivefamilies.com/pdf/employment_benefits.pdf)).

ILLUSTRATION BY WOOK JIN JUNG

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**ADOPTION AT SCHOOL**

**STRATEGY:**

Discuss adoption with your child's teacher. Ask about potentially sticky assignments. Use the appointment as an opportunity to educate the teacher about adoption.

Talk to the school's principal or director. Offer to lead a discussion group on adoption issues for all the teachers.

Make an adoption presentation to your child's class. Zach's kindergarten teacher said she thought my talk cleared up some misconceptions.

Revisit adoption as your child progresses through school. At six, your child may be delighted to have you talk to her class. At 14, she might not want the attention. Keep the lines of communication open.

**FOR MORE INFORMATION:**

"A Memo to My Fellow Teachers" (AF Jan/Feb 02, [www.adoptivefamilies.com/pdf/MemoToTeachers.pdf](http://www.adoptivefamilies.com/pdf/MemoToTeachers.pdf)) or "Adoption in the Classroom" (AF Nov/Dec 01, [www.adoptivefamilies.com/pdf/Adoption\\_School.pdf](http://www.adoptivefamilies.com/pdf/Adoption_School.pdf)).

"Becoming an Advocate" (AF May/ June 02, [www.adoptivefamilies.com/articles.php?aid=291](http://www.adoptivefamilies.com/articles.php?aid=291)).

"How I Explained Adoption to the First Grade" (AF March/April 02, [www.adoptivefamilies.com/pdf/how\\_I.pdf](http://www.adoptivefamilies.com/pdf/how_I.pdf)).

"Can We Talk?" by Beth Roth (page 26 of this issue and at [www.adoptivefamilies.com/articles.php?aid=677](http://www.adoptivefamilies.com/articles.php?aid=677))

**HOW TO ANSWER INTRUSIVE QUESTIONS**



**Be prepared for nosy questions in the grocery aisle.** People seem to love asking our kids, "Where did you come from?" "Is she your real mother?" and "Why did your real mother give you away?" If you are prepared, you can answer (or refuse to answer) with confidence, showing the questioner and your child that you are proud to be an adoptive parent.

**Have everyone in the family practice appropriately vague answers.** The question I get over and over is "How much do you know about Zack and AJ's birthparents?" People want all the imagined juicy details, including medical histories, but I never bite. My pat response is "Oh, enough that we were comfortable with our decision to adopt them." If you have trouble coming up with answers, see "Too Many Questions," by Eliza Thomas (AF May/June 01, [www.adoptivefamilies.com/articles.php?aid=675](http://www.adoptivefamilies.com/articles.php?aid=675)), for tips on helping you and your child cope with intrusive questions.

**Teach your child that it's OK not to answer intrusive questions.** "That's private" is a perfectly acceptable answer. Our children's histories are theirs alone, and we need to help them maintain their privacy.

**EDUCATING YOUR COMMUNITY**

| PROJECT   | HOW GET IT DONE   | INSPIRATION & IDEAS  |
|---|---|--|
| <p><b>Educate your community group, book club, church, or other organizations.</b></p>  | <p>I asked the pastor of my church if he would recognize National Adoption Awareness Month with a blessing of adoptive families during a service in the month of November. Not only was he happy to do so, he also suggested that I write a note for the parish bulletin.</p>   | <p>For the bulletin, I fashioned a statement about the top ten myths of adoption and provided sources of accurate information, including my state's Department of Children and Family Services and several adoption Web sites.</p>   |
| <p><b>Arrange a display at your public library.</b></p>   | <p>When I asked my local librarian to create a special display of adoption books for National Adoption Awareness Month, all it took was one letter pitching my idea, with an offer to donate several books for their collection.</p>  | <p>Later, the librarian told me that the books had generated quite a bit of interest. She was constantly having to replace the checked-out books with new ones.</p>  |
| <p><b>Write a story for your local paper about an adoptive family or adoption event in your area, or write an editorial on an adoption-related issue.</b></p> | <p>Get to know local reporters and editors, and send them ideas for stories about adoption. Try to tie your story into a national news story if you can. If you're not a writer, you can always offer yourself as an "expert" to be quoted in their stories about adoption.</p> | <p>For tips on how to approach local media outlets, see "Until They Get It Right," by veteran journalist and adoption advocate Adam Pertman (AF Mar/Apr 03, <a href="http://www.adoptivefamilies.com/articles.php?aid=617">www.adoptivefamilies.com/articles.php?aid=617</a>).</p> |
| <p><b>Let your senator or representative know where you stand on adoption-related legislation.</b></p>  | <p>Every member of the U.S. Congress has his or her own Web site, complete with mailing address, numbers to call, and, in most cases, an e-mail form that makes getting in touch convenient.</p>  | <p>Adoptive families are an increasingly organized, vocal, and powerful interest group—and politicians are taking notice!</p>  |

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