

# HOW TO HONOR YOUR CHILD'S BIRTH FAMILY

**By Tony Hynes, Training Specialist, The Center for Adoption Support and Education, Inc.**

“Where are your real parents?” “Why are you a different color than your mom?” “Why do you have two moms?” All were questions I, a Black former foster youth growing up with two White moms, received often. To me, the answers were simple: “These are my real parents, I’ve lived with them almost my whole life.” “I am a different color than my parents because White people have legal guardianship of me.” “I have two moms because two women sought to adopt me.” In time, I realized that people were not asking about my family because they were interested in the present — no, they were interested in the past, in what I had lost. When framed that way many of the questions took on a different tone: “What happened to you?” “Why don’t you live with your birth family?” “Why did you lose your first family?” were how the questions began to sound. I did not know the answers to these questions or who to get them from. A joint custody agreement had been arranged between my birth family and my moms. I lived with my moms and visited my birth family every other weekend. Like many children in my position, I found myself wondering which family to be loyal to, or rather, which family I was being disloyal too. If I had a good day with my birth family, I refrained from talking about it with my moms for fear that hearing me talk of my day positively would make them jealous of my birth family, or worse, that they would think I did not view them as my legitimate parents. After bad days with my birth family, I worried that if I talked about it, my moms would get angry at my birth family. If conflict ensued, I knew neither one of my families would ever accept the other, that I would always feel caught in the space in between, a space that continued to make me feel as though I was picking which family I was going to belong to, rather than allowing me to share my life with both of them. The challenges I faced were not unique to me. What I yearned for was for my birth family to be honored. My adoptive family had already been honored. They were honored when the courts decided that they were the more suitable home for me to grow up in. They were honored when I agreed to change my last name to their last name. They were honored when I told a judge at the age of 7 that I would rather live with them than with anyone else. It was time for my birth family to be honored as well.

Sometimes parents ask me what they can do to honor the birth families of their children. The first step I encourage them to take revolves around language. One of my moms got a lesson in this a few years ago. I had just come back from my relative’s house.

“How was Ms. Davis’s?” My mom said.

I paused.

“Mom, could you call her Grandma instead of Ms. Davis?”

CULTURAL HUMILITY

“Oh,” my mom said. “Yes. I did not know...I just got to know her as Ms. Davis, and so that’s what I called her. “Yes, I will do that.”

For years I had felt uncomfortable when my mom addressed my Grandmother as Ms. Davis. However, it was on that day that I finally realized what I needed from her—to address my Grandmother as part of my family, because that is what she was. Honoring your child’s birth family does not stop with the language you use to describe them. However, it does start there. In the eyes of your child, whether positive or negative, the language you use reveals not only how you feel about their birth families, but about them as well. If you infer that your child’s birth parents are reckless, your child may think that they will be reckless too. If you look down on the class status of your child’s birth parents, they will think you are looking down on their birth family, and by extension, on them as well.

Foster youth carry both their own origin stories and that of their birth families. The feeling of coming from an impoverished background does not cease when a foster youth goes to live with a resource family, much like the feeling of being Black does not cease when a foster youth goes to live with a White resource family. This is why the language you use in addressing not only your child’s birth family, but topics based around class, race, religion, and other subjects, remains impactful in regard to the messages you are sending to your children about how you feel about them. In honoring their children’s birth families, supportive adoptive parents must also engage in the process of cultural humility. The National Institutes of Health (NIH) defines cultural humility as “a lifelong process of self-reflection and self-critique whereby the individual not only learns about another's culture, but one starts with an examination of her/his own beliefs and cultural identities.” However, in supporting adoptees, adoptive parents in interracial adoptive households must not only **learn** about the culture(s) of their children’s birth family, but **embrace** them.

Learning about each other does not require us to accept one another, embracing each other however, does. While embracing new cultures, adoptive parents will find themselves in unfamiliar territory. For example, my White adoptive parents learned that a diverse environment was important for me to experience. After their discovery, they embraced Black culture by taking me to a predominantly Black mall close to our home on regular occasions. When they were there, they did not avoid others hoping they would get to leave soon. Indeed, they spent time engaging others in conversation whenever it was appropriate. In doing so, they showed me that they were willing to be the minority in a room, an experience they knew I went through often at my mostly White school and at our mostly White family gatherings. At the mall however, they existed in a mostly Black environment. I am sure being the “only” was not always a comfortable exercise for them. Nor should it have been. Embracing one another’s cultures requires us to examine our prior assumptions and biases and catapult ourselves into situations that are often out of our comfort zones.

Adoptees need parents who are willing to shift out of those comfort zones to support their children. Parents willing to learn more about their own cultural histories to show their children that their family fully embraces being a multiracial, multicultural family. Parents who embrace the birth families of their children by speaking positively about the cultural histories of their children's birth parents. Parents willing to find commonalities in forming friendships with individuals from their children's racial groups to illustrate to their children that their children are not "their first Brown friend," for example. Parents open to accepting that their children will likely experience racism, and that it is up to them to understand what that racism might look like in practice, and how they can help their children form healthy identities in spite of it. And parents willing to speak up—and speak out, when their children face racism, even if that racism comes from their family members. Adoptive parents are not alone in undertaking this endeavor. A community of professionals, resource parents, and those with lived experience are here to help guide you.

## Four things you can do to honor your children's birth families:

**1. Encourage your children to write a letter to their birth parents.** The letter can encompass anything they would like it to, from potential questions they would like to ask their birth parents/families, to how they are feeling about their adoptive experience. The beauty of the letters is that they do not have to be shared with you or their birth parents. They are your children's to keep. If they are younger and do not have the ability to write for themselves, they can dictate what they would like to say to a family therapist.

If your children are in contact with their birth families, they can choose if and when they would like to send the letters. If they are not in contact with their birth families, they may choose to keep the letters in a keepsake. This can also be done even if they are in contact with their birth families. The overall experience allows children the opportunity to express feelings of loss related to separation from their birth families and lets them know that they have your permission to think about and consider their birth families, without judgment from you. Before you send the letters to your child's birth family, speak with an adoption competent professional about how to establish trust and boundaries between your child's birth family to enable a safe environment for both families.

**2. Set up times to interact with your child's birth family if possible.** If possible, set up regular times where your child (and you) can interact with their birth family (either virtually or in person). This act shows that you desire having and maintaining a relationship with your child's birth family, and that it is OK for your child to want that as well. (Note that your child's birth family consists of both their birth parents as well as extended relatives, siblings, grandparents, etc.).

**3. Celebrate the states or nations your child's birth family is from.** Take the time to educate yourself on the history and culture of the places your birth child's family is from and share that information with your children. If possible, take your children to visit those places. If

you are in contact with your child's birth family, consider spending a day with them in the area their birth parents are from. These actions show your child that their birth family's histories are things that will be honored and shared in your home, and that you will honor the places and cultures your child's birth family is from.

**4. Don't withhold information (even if difficult) from your children about their origin stories and birth family histories.** Reach out to an adoption competent therapist for information on how to tell your children difficult information in age-appropriate ways and remember that your children are the owners of their origin stories.

## About Tony Hynes

Tony Hynes, a former foster youth, was adopted by a same sex couple in the mid-1990s. He writes about his experiences growing up in his memoir "The Son With Two Moms." Hynes completed his master's thesis in sociology on the psychology of children within the same sex headed household in 2013, and in the fall of 2017 was awarded a full scholarship to begin doctoral studies in language, literacy and culture at the University of Maryland. His dissertation focuses on social connectedness among interracial adoptees. In his time as training specialist at C.A.S.E, Hynes has designed innovative training curriculums that help families and professionals respond to evaluation and assessment tools that encapsulate holistic pictures of adoptees and foster youth.