

## How Adoptees Are Shaping Post-Adoption Services

STEVE KALB, DIRECTOR OF POST-ADOPTION SERVICES, HOLT INTERNATIONAL CHILDREN'S SERVICES

ANGELA TUCKER, DIRECTOR OF POST-ADOPTION SERVICES, AMARA

*Steve Kalb and Angela Tucker are the Directors of post adoption services at Holt International Children's Services and Amara respectively. Holt is the world's leader in international adoption while prioritizing care for vulnerable children overseas through family preservation and in-country care. Amara is a U.S. child welfare agency whose mission is to ensure that every child in foster care has the love and support of a committed family—as quickly as possible and for as long as each child needs.*

“Pre and post adoption services consists of case management, including referrals to community resources that are in the best interest of the child.” (Kids First of Florida, 2018). When discussing this programmatic concept with adoptees, one responded “How will we know what’s in the best interest of the child, without consulting said ‘child’?”

Many adoptees around the world have begun sharing their experiences of adoption. One strong and resounding message has been that there are lifelong consequences when one is removed from their original attachment to their biological mother in utero. Programs that enhance the well-being of adoptees continue to evolve with our growing understanding of the adoptee experience. Antiquated models of birth culture primacy and “Love conquers all” have given way to community building and open dialogue about the challenges of adoption.

Adoption services have focused on the front end of adoption: assessment training and matching of children to prospective parents. Once the adoption is finalized most agencies and adoption attorneys/facilitators consider their responsibility to the family to be finished, and many feel that an

adoption marks the beginning of a new, healthier life. The recognition that an adoption finalization results in additional needs is only a recent development, thanks, in part, to the adult adoptees that have begun sharing their experiences.

Rudd Adoption Research Program 2017 Annual Report states the following:

In recent decades, emerging adult adoptees have become more involved in efforts to shape adoption policy, as evidenced by growing numbers of adoptee-led organizations that advocate for the rights of adoptees. This greater involvement suggests that when making decision about adoption agency policies that impact adoptees, it is important to understand the perspectives of the adoptees themselves. (p. 7)

### Current trends in International and Domestic post adoption services

#### Post-Adoption within International Adoption

Post adoption services within international adoption have been slow developing over its history. This has largely been due to a lack of international adoptee voice to provide feedback to the international adoption industry on the experiences and needs of the adoptee community. This lack of voice stems from three major elements of modern international adoption.

### #1 Adoptive placement location

Prospective adoptive families are not required to reside in particular regions or locales in order to adopt. The result of this adoption standard scatters adoptive families thinly across the United States (Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute, 2010). Such physical scattering of adoptive families across the U.S. (and around the world) delays the development of a group identity which may be more capable, due to critical mass and volume of coordinated voices, of expressing needs for post adoption support and programming.

### #2: Expectation of Gratitude

The common altruistic discourse around international adoption has created a popularly perceived motivation to adopt. It is this perception that many adoptees will criticize in private, but tolerate in public, for fear of implicitly criticizing their parents if they criticize the misconception (Kalb, 2012). The love adoptees have for their parents and their instinct to protect them emotionally tends to prevent honest conversation about the challenges they face as adoptees, therefore creating a void in post adoption services due to the lack of industry awareness of adoptee issues.

### #3: Emphasis on “Birth Culture”

The adoption industry’s current “one size fits all” birth culture approach continues to endorse an identity development strategy that burdens the adoptee with stereotypes that many are trying to escape. This birth culture primacy also socially brackets adoptees and their families into sub-groups defined by their country of origin, preventing a unified expression of needs for the industry to address with more robust post adoption services.

## Post-Adoption within Domestic Adoption

In the United States, just 17 states were classified as having substantial post-adoption programs. Thirteen states were classified as not offering any adoption specific services outside of the subsidy. The other 19 states were classified as moderate, in that they had some specialized services for adoptive families, most often education and/or support groups. (The Donaldson Adoption Institute, 2015).

In a survey conducted by Amara in 2017, over half of the 786 Adoptive Parents surveyed said the first year after placement was Difficult or Extremely Difficult. In addition, 75% out of the 30 adoptees surveyed indicated they first felt the need for

The following chart shows the most requested services by population from domestic adoptions (in no specific order):

ADOPTIVE PARENTS	BIRTH/FIRST FAMILY	ADOPTees
Helplines/WARMLines:	Official Communication Agreements	Search & Reunion Assistance
Therapy	Therapy	Therapy—grief, loss, identity development, self-esteem
Respite	Advocacy	Agency support: Non-Identifying Information, Medical history
Agency support: Triad Communication support	Agency Support: Correspondence Liaison	
Medicaid (Foster children)	Online support groups	Online support groups
Online support groups		

post-adoption support around family/centered events and situations like: holidays, birthdays, completion of medical information forms, searching for birth family, and when meeting their birth family.

## The “Adoptee Approach” for building Post-Adoption programs

Holt and Amara’s current post adoption services build upon their pioneering and innovative principles by layering on top of industry leading professional services, the development of programs through an adoptee lens. This approach, simply put, is **programming by adoptees, for adoptees**.

The traditional post adoption services, e.g. counseling/therapy, tours, birth search, were created without the input from adoptees. These services—and others like them—have served the adoption community well. However, the lived experiences of adoptees who understand the value of the adoptee community based on their personal and professional experience in adoption, brings a nuanced element of credibility to the design table that doesn’t currently exist in the post adoption landscape. The adoptee approach enhances traditional post-adoption services and revolutionizes what we’re capable of creating in the future.

## Two adoption languages

With adoptees at the center of our learning, we’ve discovered a barrier to effective communication within the adoption community. This barrier can be broken down into the simple concept of two different languages used by adoptees when speaking about adoption. We’ll refer to these languages as “popular” and “avoided.”

The popular language is commonly used. The conversations typically revolve around themes of love, family, homecoming, rescue/save, reunion, and providence. It’s a simple language and discourse that’s become the standard for discussions on adoption; in and outside of the adoptive home.

The avoided language is rarely used. It often revolves around themes of grief/loss/mourning, fear, racism, uncertainty, and anger. This language has few fluent speakers because when used, the public quickly redirects to the popular language.

The popular language limits adoptees in how they communicate about adoption and their personal experiences. When expressing challenges, fears, doubt, or wonders regarding adoption, many adoptees are misunderstood or silenced because of the ubiquity of the popular language. Through the “Adoptee Approach”, messages expressed through the avoided language can be recognized, validated, and utilized to create relevant programming and support.

### Post-Adoption Programs that Utilize The Adoptee Approach

PROGRAM	MISSION/OBJECTIVE	LOCATION
Holt Adoptee Camp	An overnight residential youth camp program designed to provide an environment of physical and emotional safety, self-discovery, and fun. Within a community of Adoptees, campers will share their common experiences while exploring topics in adoption, race, and identity development.	<a href="#">Oregon, Wisconsin, Nebraska, New Jersey</a> Holt International

Adoptee Meets World	AMW is a college social program designed to create community for adoptee students in the college environment. We hope to fill the space that is created when venturing outside the comfort zones and familiarity of their local communities and hometowns, where many adoptees have rarely been regularly perceived as a member of their racial group. We strive to create an additional cultural group option for adoptees not fully prepared to participate in cultural and ethnic clubs their birth country would dictate.	University of Oregon Eugene, OR
Circle Back	To assist and guide youth adoptees through the development of healthy identity. We hope to acknowledge and process different facets of their adoptee and racial identities, and connect youth adoptees with older adoptees in a way that is uniquely tailored to each adoptee and family.	<a href="#">Circle Back</a> Online Holt International
Inclusive Family Model	Equip family caseworkers with ways to navigate openness between the adoptive family and first/birth family. The organization in which this model was developed is unique in its proactive stance toward helping facilitate openness as an act of social justice, particularly regarding the experiences of first/birth family and their lack of power in the post-finalization relationship as they often have no recourse if an adoptive parent decides to discontinue contact.	<a href="#">Amara</a> Seattle, WA
<a href="#">STAR Mentorship Program</a>	The STAR Program will promote a sense of belonging and positive peer interactions through group mentorship with those who've had similar life experiences. We desire for every adoptee to have had an opportunity to connect with other adoptees prior to their adulthood as we believe adoptee-to-adoptee relationships promotes healthy adoptee identity formation (a major task of adolescence). Because being with others of a shared experience is powerful!	<a href="#">Amara</a> Seattle, WA Tacoma, WA
<a href="#">The Adopted Life Episodes</a>	The series features interviews between teen and pre-teen transracial adoptees and adult transracial adoptee, Angela Tucker. The purpose is to bring awareness and education to the public about complex issues such as racial identity formation, searching for and having open relationships with birth/biological families, and, in some cases, having little to no information about one's biological families.	Online

Utilizing The Adoptee Approach when deciding upon programming will get beyond what others deem the “best interest of the child,” and instead will include the stated interests of the adoptee.

Adoptees walk a thin line between balancing others’ expectations with their true reality, seeking to conform, yet are often pummeled with statements that infer inferiority or force us to receive “praise” as though we are recently adopted children, needing to be rescued. Without considering the adoptee experience, programming may inevitably cause adoptees to feel that there is something wrong with us that needs fixing.

Adoption is a lifelong experience for a child and a family. It is normal to face challenges; some challenges may even appear long after the adoption has been finalized. Adoption support and preservation services are a valuable way to get guidance and needed support and also to find others who understand, and perhaps share, your experiences.

## Implications for the Future of Adoption: Research

- The necessity for prominent adoptee voice in research methods and topics will be critical for greater understanding of post adoption needs.
- As more adoptees find their voice through attentive and relevant post adoption services, the need for understanding this population will continue to require further study.

## Implications for the Future of Adoption: Practice

- The adoption industry will need to allocate more resources to serve the post adoption needs of the adoptee and adoptive family populations.
- The adoption industry needs a stronger emphasis on community building, identity development, and effective communication amongst the adoption triad in pre-adopt and post-adopt education and support.

## Implications for the Future of Adoption: Policy

- As adoptees continue to age and become a more prominent voice in adoption industry advocacy, policies will evolve to better reflect adoptee sensitivities regarding “best interest of the child.”

Note: The video of the presentation on which this paper was based is available for viewing on the Rudd Adoption YouTube Channel, at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YduluNQQPg4&list=PL7obuMoN-gYN-GJbrpi5dCuMhAbaJLxKT-&index=3>

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## AUTHORS



### Steve Kalb, LMSW

Steve is the Director of Post Adoption Services at Holt International Children's Services. Steve is an adult adoptee from the Midwest. He received his MSW in 2009 and is currently pursuing his Ph.D. in Social Work and Social Research focusing on Adoptee community and empowerment models. Since 2005, Steve has worked directly with hundreds of adoptees through the Holt adoptee camps and birth search counseling. He has seen the need for, and benefit of, a strong adoptee community; that experience guides his adoptee advocacy work at Holt. Steve lives with his wife and 6-year-old daughter in Eugene, Oregon.



Amara

### Angela Tucker, Founder of [The Adopted Life](#)

Angela works as the Director of Post-Adoption Services at Amara, and manages The Adopted Life consulting and speaking firm. Angela is a nationally-recognized thought leader on transracial adoption and is an advocate for adoptee rights. In 2013, at the age of 26, Angela's own story of adoption and search for her birth parents was featured in the groundbreaking documentary, CLOSURE. Angela lives with her husband in Seattle, Washington.