

# Truth, Consequences and Reform: Rethinking Adoption in the 21st Century

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Rethinking adoption in the 21st century requires that all of us—adopted people, birth parents, adoptive parents, researchers, practitioners and policy makers consider all possibilities, even those which might make us feel uncomfortable. The truth, the consequences of that “truth,” and the need for reform is what I hope to explore with you in this paper.

Let’s reflect on some recent national data derived from the U. S. Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS 25, for fiscal year 2017):

- There are 442,995 children/youth in foster care
- 123,437 children/youth were waiting to be adopted in this period of time
- 59,430 children/youth were adopted from public child welfare during this period

*Let’s look at who adopts:*

Married Couples	68%	40,136
Unmarried Couples	3%	1,865
Single Females	25%	14,811
Single Males	3%	1,983

*Let’s look at the relationship of the parent(s) prior to adoption:*

Non-Relative	14%	8,209
Foster Parent	51%	29,445
Stepparent	0%	77
Other Relative	35%	20,274

Reflecting on these data, I asked myself, so what is new in adoption? Just the other day I saw an email from the Children’s Bureau about New Issues in Adoption and I thought, “Oh great, I will

get some new information to present in this paper” and—boy was I surprised when I opened the documents and found two or three things from 2012 and 2013!

So, what’s new in Adoption? Where is adoption going in the 21st century? I could come up with lots of academic and scholarly answers to those questions, but the reality is that the only answer is: I am not sure where adoption is going in the 21st century.

It seems to me that adoption policies and practices have been rather stagnant for a couple of decades.

## So, here is what’s new!

We need to have a new conversation about adoption!

### How do we begin?

Let’s ask ourselves some tough questions:

- How do we meaningfully engage all people affected by adoption—adopted people, birth parents and adoptive parents, siblings, other relatives?
- How do we make it possible for people most affected by adoption to have access to their lives, to their ethnicity, and to their history?
- When are we really going to start to address the issue of older youth and adoption? Babies are a big commodity, but teens are still seen as “damaged goods”
- When are we going to have real meaningful discussions about race, class, and culture as they relate to adoption?
- When are we going to really address issues as they pertain to lesbian, gay, bi and trans people who want to adopt and youth who may need to be adopted and who identify as LGBT?

- When are we going to start to refuse to allow conservative politicians to make our lives their issues—not because they genuinely care about the issue—but because it will win them votes from conservative constituents?
- When are we going to stop having people in state and federal governments controlling what gets spoken about and what doesn't?
- How do we get those “adoption ladies” to stop controlling what can be discussed and what cannot be discussed, what gets funded and what doesn't get funded?
- When are we going to address the fact that our country still maintains a story book, fairy tale view of adoption?

Most Americans hardly even understand the realities and complexities of adoption and even less understand foster care. So . . . let's look at what we can do to start framing the changes that need to happen!

## Adoption is Not a One-Time Event

- Adoption is not a one-time event—it is a lifelong journey that affects the entire family system.
- Adoption is a transformational experience.
- Critical to this are pre-and post permanency services and preparation for parents.
- Critical to supporting this are adoption competent therapists.
- Everyone talks about the need for post permanency services to support families, but no one wants to pay for it.
- There are no post permanency supports for intercountry adoption.
- Families need support throughout their adoption experience to identify and access services to ensure their well-being.
- Professionals working with those affected by adoption need credentials and education that assist them in better understanding the adoption experience.

## Adoption is in Need of a Cultural Shift in Transparency, Openness, and Equality

- Adoption is not a business transaction. It's a human transaction—but where is the humanity in adoption?
- Adoption is in need of a cultural shift in: Transparency; Openness; and Equality
- Restore to adopted people unrestricted access to a copy of their original birth certificates.
- We need to smash secrecy and dishonesty.
- Potential adoptive parents should be evaluated on their qualifications not their sexual orientation or gender identity expression.
- We all need to refuse to buy into “conscience bills” and see them for what they are—legalized discriminatory practices.

## Money and Privilege Distort Adoption

- High fees and economic inequality promotes segregation in adoption.
- Adoption of children and youth from foster care should be incentivized.
- Fee structures should never be based on race, ethnic background or needs of the child.

## Move Toward Uniformity in Adoption

- Adoption varies widely from state to state. National standards, uniform and rigorous home study process, options counseling, post adoption support, and professional training can all assist in grounding adoption practice.
- Consistent and standardized requirements for post permanency service should be required.
- Services need to be well funded and accessible.
- Rehoming exemplifies the worst of what can happen when there are no checks and balances in a system.

*Note: The entire video of the keynote presentation on which this paper was based may be found here:*  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z8gTohrH8Q4>

## Lack of Understanding About Adoption

- People most affected by adoption need to have their meaningful voice honored.
- Stigmatizing depictions of adoption and foster care by the media must be challenged.
- Professionals and families need to be better educated about the unique needs of adoption

*So, if we know what is wrong, how do we talk about what **works**?*

- Innovative programs like the Treehouse Communities with money to fund them can be game changing.
- Continuous training and education to produce and support adoption competent professionals will help all of our families.
- Creating systems, policies, practices and approaches which create openness and less secrecy will help those affected by adoption move toward health and healing.
- DNA testing like 23andMe and Ancestry.com can help adopted persons connect to their biological roots.
- Recruit, train, and support committed professionals who "feel" adoption is critical.
- A different kind of research grounded in practice and "lived experiences" of people affected by adoption will change the conversation about "evidence."

*In reflecting on some final thoughts on change, I found two quotes that helped me to anchor this conversation about the process of change:*

- "The secret of change is to focus all of your energy, not on fighting the old, but on building the new."
- "Your desire to change must be greater than your desire to stay the same."

*If these quotes and the above-mentioned suggestions for change don't work, maybe a prayer might:*

And May God Bless You  
 With Enough Foolishness to Believe  
 That You Can Make a Difference in The World,  
 So That You  
 Can Do What Others Claim Cannot be Done  
*A Franciscan Prayer*

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