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Adopted daughter resents being labeled 'not real'

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Dear Abby: Recently in a department store, I overheard a conversation between two women that made my blood boil. One woman identified a neighbor by saying, "The one with the adopted son."

Abby, I am 42 years old and was adopted at birth. My adoptive mother was the nurse assisting in the delivery, and my adoptive father was also present at birth. In fact, while anxiously waiting to see his new daughter, Dad slipped and fell, so we joke, "Dad sure fell for his daughter." My loving parents told me early on that I was adopted and did it in such a way that I felt adopted meant "special" and "handpicked."

Perhaps the comment hit a nerve because my aunts, uncles and cousins from both sides of the family often referred to my brother and me as "Mervin and Ethel's adopted kids." My parents and grandparents were never guilty of using that unnecessary adjective.

Does "adopted" mean "less than"? Am I less of a daughter because someone else gave birth to me? Even at my grandmother's funeral, I was mentioned as her "adopted granddaughter." Sadly, my extended family still, after all these years, treats me as though I am not part of the "real" family.

Abby, the purpose of my letter is to let people know they do damage by distinguishing between "the adopted kid" and "the kids." The mother and father who adopted me, fed me, clothed me and disciplined me were my parents, and our family is as "real" as the families into which other children are "born." I would be proud to have you use my name.

- Marva Boehm Mason, Houston

Dear Marva: Your point is well taken. Once children are adopted, they "belong" to the parents as much as children who are born into the family. Not everyone who describes family members as "adopted" means to be cruel, and they probably do not realize how upsetting it can be to a child. I hope your letter will cause those who have adopted relatives to think twice before making a verbal distinction.

Dear Abby: I am a 9-year-old girl who's in the third grade, and I have a problem. My dad has not visited me in 4 1/2 years, and he has not called me since July of 1996.

I tried to call him a while back, but his phone was disconnected. I don't understand why he doesn't try to contact me.

I wish he knew how I feel so maybe he would change his mind and try to get in touch with me. I love my dad very much. I hope he reads this letter.

- Missing My Dad in Michigan

Dear Missing: Sadly, there are many children who, like you, are longing to hear from their absent father or mother. Some adults forget that children are capable of understanding almost anything if they are given the opportunity. One phone call or letter that explains why the parent cannot stay in close contact at the moment will do wonders toward putting a child's mind at ease.