

Children First: Making the Paradigm Shift from Infertility to Adoption

By [Patricia Irwin Johnston](#)

Moving from infertility to adoptive parenting is a complicated emotional process. In transferring from the process and the culture of infertility and its treatment to the process and culture of adoption, consumers are expected to make a huge shift. The Barrier? Medical treatment is centered on the needs and wishes of the paying-client—the adult who wanted a baby (that's you!). Adoption's culture is centered on the needs and best interests of the one client who has no say in the process and who bears no financial responsibility—the child (not you!) Adoption is child-centered rather than adult-centered. But you, one of three clients in the picture, will carry all of the financial risk and burden.

Not fair, you say? I understand. Been there. Felt that. But as my children by adoption have grown up, as our relationships with them and some of their birthparents have developed, I've changed my thinking a lot.

Here is something you probably don't understand if you are not yet a parent. Parenting itself changes everything. From the moment you become a parent forward, your child's needs will always come before yours and before anyone else's in your life. For those who conceive their children, that shift comes automatically as part of the pregnancy experience. Indeed, it is that shift in thinking that makes it possible for birthparents to plan an adoption.

For those who adopt, however, making that shift is not automatic. Unless one makes a deliberate choice to shift thinking, to participate in an adoption expectancy period, the shift won't likely happen until after the child arrives. And by then, many infertile couples can have made some pretty bad choices already choices rooted in their frustration, in their reactions to many losses that infertility has brought to them, in the desperation they have begun to feel about ever being able to parent.

Over the past twenty years or so, changes in adoption have done little more than move the locus of power in adoptions. First power was moved from adoption professionals to adoptive parents, and now it has been transferred to birthparents. But changes in who holds the power have not often included the education necessary for all of these parties to understand and accept what children themselves need from adoption. And what is it that children need? They need well-prepared, unafraid, stable and loving families over their entire lifetimes!

Too many of those involved in adoption right now seem to experience it as a competition. Agencies compete with other agencies and with independent service providers to draw in

limited numbers of birthparents whose healthy babies can be offered to an apparently unlimited supply of prospective adopters. Special needs agencies compete with one another for public and private grant money, and often trash one another and their differing approaches to counseling and preparation. Prospective adopters compete with other prospective adopters for the opportunity to adopt available babies. They look for too many shortcuts to faster placements by looking for providers who will not require education, extensive preparation, and screening, because it is too invasive and unfair. Adopters attempt to demonstrate to expectant parents that their adoptive family would offer a “better” life for the child about to be born than would the child’s family of origin or any other prospective adopters. When an expectant parent has a change of heart about adoption during the window of time a state or province grants for the change-of-mind process, many adopters and their professional advisors take the stance that possession-is-nine-points-of-the-law and go to court so that they might “keep” the baby, even though they are not yet the legal parents. Adopters, birthmothers and professionals often conspire to keep birthfathers and their families out of the picture entirely.

Ideally, changing adoption so that it really meets the needs of children would begin with fundamental changes in thinking and in the law. Different thinking would end the adversarial aura that surrounds adoption. If adoptions really kept the child’s interests center-stage, everybody involved in any untimely pregnancy would be seeking the best possible solution for the child to be born. This solution would find him with his permanent family (birth or adoptive) as soon as possible after his birth.

Getting off to this kind of a “clean” start in an adoption, however, demands a tremendous amount of understanding and emotional work on the part of both sets of parents, as well as careful judgment on the part of well trained and well informed professionals. Those working to launch a child-centered adoption must be helped to understand how each of the decisions made and each of the procedures followed will help the child at the adoption’s core.

For a baby’s launch to be optimal, everyone involved must be committed to being honest with everyone else in the adoption. Birthparents must be honest with one another, with helping professionals, and with prospective adopters. Adopters must be scrupulously honest with professionals and expectant parents. Intermediaries must be scrupulously honest with expectant parents and prospective adoptive parents. There must be no assumptions that leaving that little something out or letting that little something go causes no harm. Scrupulous adherence to ethical standards that keep the child at the center while respecting the needs and interests of both adoptive parents and birthparents is absolutely crucial in making all decisions concerning an adoption.

As an adoptive parent, wife, and sister-in-law, daughter-in-law, cousin-in-law to adoptees, sister-in-open-adoption to my child’s birthmother, and adoption educator, I hold those who elect to join to adopt to very high standards. That is because this is what children deserve from their parents.