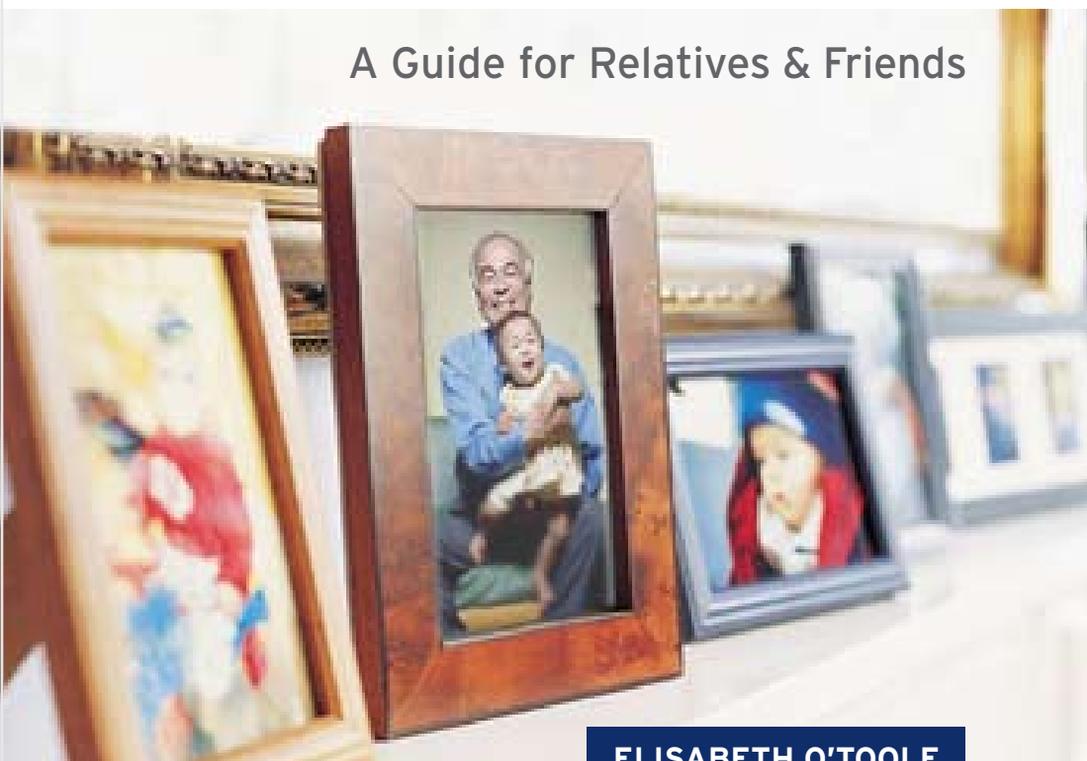


In on it:

What adoptive parents
would like you to know
about **adoption**

A Guide for Relatives & Friends



ELISABETH O'TOOLE

“Excellent. Practical and sensitive wisdom for anyone supporting a loved one’s adoption process.”

–Corrie L. Wold, MSW, LISW, Information and Education Director, Children’s Home Society and Family Services, Minneapolis

“*In On It* addresses the complex and emotional experience of adoption with humor and respect, opening a path for friends and relatives to become insiders to the process. This book will remain on my ‘recommended reading’ list for adoptive families and their friends.”

–Janna Annest, adoptive parent and adoption law columnist, ADOPTIVE FAMILIES MAGAZINE

Congratulations. Somebody you care about is adopting or has adopted. This makes you a member of their *adoption circle*.

And as a member of that circle, you deserve information and insights into adoption – from a perspective that addresses your particular interests and concerns.

This is the adoption book for grandparents and friends, neighbors and colleagues, and aunts and uncles of adoptive families.

Whether you’re excited or worried, committed or a bit reluctant, experienced or unfamiliar with adoption, *In On It* is an informative, friendly and very useful adoption guide for anyone touched by adoption. **Welcome.**

In On It explains:

What is it really like to adopt these days?

What’s it like to be an adoptive family?

How can I help and support my loved ones during their adoption process (even if I’m still questioning and learning myself)?

How can I help after they’ve become an adoptive family?

I have questions about the adoption and about the child. What’s private and what’s public? What’s tactful and what’s touchy?

How can I respond to other people’s questions and comments about adoption?

What role can I have in the adoption? What can I look forward to?

InOnAdoption.com

A portion of proceeds from the sale of this book support national and international efforts on behalf of children awaiting adoption.

FIG Press, LLC



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Fig Press • St. Paul, Minnesota

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Introduction

People in grocery stores

One afternoon, while I was wandering through the neighborhood grocery store with my son, an elderly woman approached us. White-haired and cardigan-sweatered, she was the whole package: Sweet Little Old Lady. She looked intently at my baby, who was calmly surveying things from the seat of our grocery cart, then at me, happily basking in my new motherhood, and said, “Look at that beautiful skin. Is he adopted?”

Sigh. I was just there to pick up some fruit. Maybe a loaf of bread. I opened my mouth to respond with an irritable “You know, that is really none of your business.” And stopped. Having spent my formative years being told repeatedly to mind my manners, I had developed a Pavlovian response to respecting my elders, even the annoying ones. In my family, you didn’t get to tell anyone older than your oldest sibling what you really thought of them.

So, as it usually does, good manners won out. She was old. I wanted bananas. Today was not going to be the day

I played adoption educator. I braced myself for some silly follow-up question about adoption (“What is he?” or “Does he speak Spanish?”) and answered, “As a matter of fact, he *was*.” Then I fixed her with my best “What of it?” stare.

“Oh!” She said happily, and grabbed one of my crossed arms. “My niece is adopting a daughter from China. We are all so excited for her. She’s on pins and needles. It’s just so hard for us to wait!” I relaxed. (And felt a little sheepish.) That’s all she had wanted to say: that she was in on it, too. Five minutes later she had shown me how to pick a ripe cantaloupe and knew my son by name. Thank goodness for good manners.

As a new mother, this incident was instructive. I realized that though people will wonder (sometimes aloud) about my family, they almost always mean well. The lady in the grocery store might have taken a different approach (perhaps simply mentioning her niece’s adoption, allowing me the option to decide whether or not to mention my own); but she was obviously well-intentioned and, most important, clearly happy for and supportive of her niece and the coming child.

As a friend or relative of an adoptive family, you’re in on something now. You, too, might be so excited at the prospect of welcoming the child into your life that you want to share your enthusiasm with fellow shoppers and their babies. Or perhaps you’ve found you have reservations about adoption; maybe you’re even feeling some disappointment around it.

You might be wondering how you can best help your loved ones or whether there's even a role for you in your loved one's adoption. You might be having all of these feelings—among others—at the same time. Know that you're not the only one who has felt this way about the adoption. In fact, the adoptive parents were once newly in on it, too. They, too, might have been both excited and scared, eager and reluctant. Adoption is like that.

When my husband and I first began sharing our plans to adopt, I remember being surprised by how often I was asked to explain both our decision to adopt and adoption in general. I was asked several times why we weren't adopting within the United States, when there were “so many babies who need families *right here*.” People unfamiliar with adoption advised us that our adoptive children would likely be unhealthy, because their birthmothers would be on drugs, alcoholic or HIV positive. These reactions from strangers and acquaintances were unexpected—I hadn't anticipated needing to respond to public comment on what to me were fairly private, even intimate, matters.

But more important was the realization that, as part of our adoption preparation, we needed to be able to explain adoption and our choices around it to our families and friends: people who cared deeply about us and our prospective family. I learned that I couldn't just bristle if someone made an unfortunate comment or asked an inappropriate question. I began to understand that adoptive parents can't expect others—including those closest to them—to have

had the opportunity to think through and become educated about all of the adoption-related issues that they themselves had to consider along the way to becoming parents. In fact, before they began their own adoption education, it's likely your loved ones made questionable comments and asked awkward questions about adoption, as well. I sure did.

Adoption was once very unfamiliar territory for my husband and me. When we first considered adoption, we'd had no adoptions in our immediate families and none of our close friends at the time had adopted. So my own adoption learning curve was steep. And when faced with something that both thrilled and scared me—as adoption once did—my response was to learn all I could about it. I read adoption book after adoption book. I attended every adoption seminar available and visited every adoption web site I could find. I talked to adoptive parents, people who had made an adoption plan for a child (*birthparents*), and individuals who were themselves adopted (*adoptees*). I gathered information and opinions. And the more informed and comfortable I became with adoption, the more my fears began to recede and my anticipation began to build.

Adoption was such an important, life-altering decision for us, and I wanted to share the experience with the people close to us. In fact, I felt I had a responsibility to share with my friends and loved ones some of what I was learning about adoption. These were people who would interact closely with our new family and who appreciated the opportunity to prepare for the adoption themselves. I found

myself offering them abbreviated versions of the articles and books I was reading and the classes I was attending—almost all of them intended for adoptive parents only. I'd make copies of a few pages from an adoption book, or send a link to an article, sharing information about how adoptions are currently being conducted and about what is now expected of adoptive families. And some of these trends were difficult for people unfamiliar with contemporary adoption to digest. Sometimes I felt I was explaining (or defending) our adoption plans to the raised eyebrows of benevolent skeptics—people who wanted only the best for us, but whose general understanding of adoption was not in alignment with what I was telling them about it.

What I needed was a single book of general adoption information and insights that I could offer to those who wanted to participate in our adoption experience and in our lives as an adoptive family. It would familiarize them with adoption in general, and also serve as a starting point for conversations about our own adoption. It would explain the challenges, anticipations, and joys of contemporary adoption. I wouldn't expect others to read the long, parent-oriented adoption books that I did, but instead a book that spoke to them directly, as people closely connected to an adopting family, and that sought to address *their* needs and concerns around adoption.

The result is this book on adoption, written especially for you, the grandparents and friends, aunts and uncles,

colleagues and neighbors of adoptive parents. There are a number of ways in which I hope you will find it useful.

First, this book offers you a way to acquire some of the same knowledge and insights about adoption that your loved ones have gained via their own adoption process. Much as they might want to, your loved ones may lack the time or capacity to download all that they are learning and deciding during what is an intensely personal and complicated process. Instead, this book can serve to familiarize you independently with some of what your loved ones may consider and encounter, both en route to parenthood and as an adoptive family. I suspect most parents will be grateful to you for your genuine interest in their adoption, as demonstrated by your willingness to learn about it both from them and on your own.

Second—and your loved ones may not yet have had the chance to consider this themselves—the adoption will affect *you*. Some of these effects may be subtle and only recognizable over time. Others may be obvious and immediate. One very common way friends and relatives are affected by an adoption is that they may be called upon to speak on behalf of adoption and the adoptive family. You may be asked questions or receive comments—about the child, the family, and adoption in general—to which you'll want to be prepared to respond with care and insight. This book can help you do so.

Third, adoption will have an ongoing role in the life of the family. Ultimately, most families formed through adoption are like any other family: a mix of over-scheduled, occasionally

combative individuals who adore one another. And you will likely find that's generally how you will come to think of them. But it's also true that there are particular issues and concerns—and delights—that accompany this route to parenthood. Adoption—like an adoptive family—is both ordinary and, well, extraordinary. Some familiarity with the ways that various aspects of adoption may be treated within the family can offer you both guidance and reassurance.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, someone you care about is offering you the opportunity to participate in their lives, perhaps even including you in their adoption process. This book suggests ways to be informed and involved—from providing support to a waiting family, to assisting with the transitions of a new family, to appreciating the ongoing privilege of adoption in the lives of your loved ones over time.

It was once standard to consider adoption and adoption issues only in terms of an adoption *triad*: the birthmother, the child, and the adoptive parents. Now, the adoption community recognizes a broader *constellation* of people touched by adoption, often called the *adoption circle*—all of the friends and relatives, teachers and neighbors, congregants and colleagues that may witness and support an adoption—and who may themselves impact the adoptive family. That's you—a part of someone's adoption circle, a member of the constellation of adoption. And you have a lot to look forward to.

Before you begin

In writing this book, I gathered the advice and experiences of adoptive parents, birthparents, adoptees, adoption social workers and attorneys, and friends and relatives of adoptive families. They shared their contributions via discussion groups, questionnaires, personal interviews and their own writing on adoption. Their contributions revealed that, while every family's adoption is wonderfully unique (and that almost every adoptive parent smiles as they tell their family's adoption story), there are certain commonalities to the experience of adoption. There are standard challenges and opportunities to be expected, typical frustrations and joys, and universal advice pertinent to the adoption circle of almost any adoptive family. (Oddly, many adoptive parents have their own grocery store incident to recount; ask your loved ones.)

I hope this book can suggest for you some of what your friends or relatives have experienced or are experiencing on their adoption journey. Many of the anecdotes and insights discussed here will resonate with you and your loved ones; others may not. This is as it should be. Your experience with an adoption will be very much your own. My hope is that, besides providing useful information and insights, this book also prompts questions and conversations between you and your loved ones. Because their perspective on adoption is really the most important.

Note that this book is intended to *introduce* you—friends and relatives—to adoption. If there's a particular adoption

issue that you would like to know about in more detail than is provided here (e.g., open adoption, older child adoption, transracial adoption, building attachment), there are many helpful books, web sites, and organizations devoted to specific topics in adoption. A list of resources at the end of the book offers some suggestions.

For the purposes of simplicity and clarity, the book generally refers to adoptive parents (plural) and the adoptive child (singular). Of course many adoptions entail a single parent or more than one child, and this book is meant to encompass their perspectives as well.

Finally, you're reading this book because you want to share in the experience of your loved ones who are adopting or have adopted. You may have questions about how best to do so. Throughout the book you'll find lists of specific suggestions and ideas for helping and supporting your loved ones. To that end, the following page lists some ideas for things you can do right now to show your interest and begin to participate in their lives as an adoptive family.

What you can do

Offer to share the adoption journey with the adoptive parents. Let them know that you're reading this book or otherwise educating yourself about adoption.

Encourage them to see your perspective. Remind them that adoption was once new to them, too.

You may need to take some risks. Part of being involved

and supportive will include asking and talking about adoption. If you are unsure about how to discuss adoption, this book offers information and insights that can make you feel more confident when you do. But give yourself permission to inadvertently say what may be interpreted as the “wrong” thing. Everyone—including adoptive parents—does.

Understand that at times the adoptive parents may be sensitive about the subject of adoption and their child. At times adoption may be a touchy topic for the adoptive parents, especially if they're still becoming comfortable with it themselves.

Maybe you feel you've made mistakes in the past or said things you regret. Consider making an apology if you think one is warranted. Tell your loved ones you're trying to learn more about adoption. Forgive yourself and move on.

Be open to learning and growing.