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A Conversation with author Elisabeth O'Toole

**IN ON IT: What Adoptive Parents Would Like You
To Know About Adoption**

A Guide for Relatives and Friends

(Fig Press, January 2011) \$14.95

www.inonadoption.com

Why do friends and relatives of adoptive families need a guidebook of their own?

To families and friends, the adoption process can often seem very private and kind of mysterious. It's not like a pregnancy where we all understand the norms and the customs, the doctor's visits and the baby showers, and all the cues that tell us how to welcome a new child. With adoption, every case is a little different---some people will announce their intention to adopt right away, others want to wait until they receive a referral, and sometimes the news can seem like a surprise to people who may not be aware of the decision process behind adoption. And until you've experienced an adoption—as they're practiced today—it's not uncommon to have misperceptions about the process. I know I did. Because of all of these variables, well meaning people don't always know how to participate in this process, because they don't know what's expected of them, or what their role will be. My goal in writing this book is to invite these people to be “in on it” from the start and to really think about the ways they can support adoptive families, and anticipate their sometimes special needs.

What does the term “adoption circle” mean?

For a long time, the trend in the adoption community has been to focus on the “adoption triad”—the birth parents, the adoptive parents, and the child. And while those are still the key members of any adoption, recently there's been more interest in broadening our idea about who is affected by adoption, and so now the term that's often used is “the adoption circle.” That circle can include relatives and cousins, friends and neighbors, teachers and even work colleagues. I really like this idea because it encourages everyone who cares about the adoptive family to come forward, and it also recognizes that everyone in the circle is going to have a role to play in this child's life.

But as you write, not everyone in a family’s “adoption circle” is always supportive of this news.

That’s true, and that’s another reason I wrote this book. I was interested in finding a way of reassuring people who might not be in full support of a family’s decision to adopt—who might have fears, or concerns, or negative feelings about it. Adoptive families can feel very vulnerable and overwhelmed when they share this decision, and I wanted to offer them a really useful—and neutral—tool for opening up that conversation.

What’s one thing that adoptive families wish everyone else understood?

That adoptive families have the same desires for privacy as anyone else. Almost every family I spoke with had an experience where a complete stranger asks a question like, “Are you his *real* mom?” or “How much did you pay for her?” I think sometimes people feel entitled to demand information about an adoptive family in a way that they don’t with other families, possibly because adoption has this public aspect as a legal process. They’ll make unfortunate comments, or ask about someone’s adoptive status in the grocery store—all the sorts of things that, if they thought about it for a moment, they might recognize are not appropriate to ask or expect of *any* family. When this happens—and it happens to everyone—I try to remember that people usually mean well, but they haven’t had the opportunity to gather their own information, and their concept of adoption may be very outdated.

Yet you say these awkward moments can be helpful, too.

It’s true, because they sometimes give you the opening you need to educate people gently and graciously if you can. I certainly have said some bone-headed things about adoption and I’ll continue to because the point is to have those conversations when the opportunities come up. Adoptive families told me that one of the most hurtful things they experienced was when people who were close to them asked no questions at all, because it provides no space for an adoptive family to talk about their own decision, to dispel fears, to explain the process in a way that will really reassure people, and to share the incredible privilege of adoption with the people they care about. So definitely, the idea is to talk.

What do you hope people take away from reading this book?

I hope they feel invited to participate in the adoption experience in a new way. I heard from a grandmother whose son and daughter-in-law are awaiting an international adoption that reading this book made her feel very included in the process, and that it made her feel even more grateful and protective of the grandchild she’s about to meet. I hope others who read this feel the same way, and see a role for themselves within this new family.