

What Adopted Kids & Adults Think About Being Special

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"You're so lucky to be adopted!"

"Just be thankful that you were chosen!"

"We chose you because you are special!"

Such are the comments that adopted children and adults often hear. Words that parents and well-meaning family and friends offer, but words that often carry a different translation for many adoptees than the adult intends. Not all adoptees, but many. Some adoptees say with pride that they were "chosen" and that this gives them a sense of self-worth.

Often adoptive parents and those who love the adoptee may not have been told that when a child is relinquished, it usually translates emotionally as rejection and abandonment. Even though many parents haven't been told about this painful reality, I believe that because they are so in tune with their beloved child, they intuitively long to extend comfort. To help him feel welcomed into the world and into their family. To feel cherished. Propelled by this loving desire to comfort, welcome, and cherish, they reassure the child that he or she is "special" or "chosen."

The birth parents were probably also propelled by love for their offspring and made the most thoughtful adoption plan possible. Only the best would do for their child. They may have even written a letter to the baby and called him "special." However, by the time the adoptee is seven or eight years of age, he is cognitively able to reason that to be "chosen" means that he was first "unchosen." This is as real in many adoptee's emotions as the color of the sky is to their eyes. This realization, coupled with comments about being "special," creates what psychologists call "cognitive dissonance." In other words, what they are hearing is the direct opposite of what their heart and emotions are telling them is true. There is a sense of inner chaos with no knowledge of the cause. It is virtually impossible for adopted children or adults to articulate this confusion. "Something inside just doesn't feel right" is about as close as they can come.

So, how do adopted children translate comments such as those listed in the beginning of this article?

- * "We have an agenda for your life."
- * "You must prove your worth by excelling in order to be loved and fit in this family."
- * "Whatever you want to be in life must be set aside in order to fulfill the expectations of 'specialness' in this family."
- * "You're not like everyone else...you're different."
- * "We're going to put pressure on you to perform."
- * "Be perfect."
- * "Conform! Conform! Conform!"
- * "It's not okay just to be yourself."

In addition, if a child associates "being special" with his adoption experience, he may carry that a step further into the spiritual realm. For example, when he hears words such as "being adopted by God," that same sense of chaos can create an emotional blockage and make it nearly impossible for spiritual truth to be appropriated and enjoyed. The phrase "adopted by God" is taken from Ephesians 1:4-5 (NIV): "For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will--to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves." Being adopted by God is illustrated best by a man who came to a large doorway. Above the entry was written "Whoever will may enter." The man chooses to enter the door and when he looks back, he sees the words "chosen before the foundation of the world."

So what are parents to do?

Don't tell your child he or she is special! If you have already begun, stop. Say something like this instead: "I am so glad your birth parents gave you to us to love!"

Discuss the topic with your child by asking open-ended questions:

- * "What do you think the word 'special' means?"
- * "How do you feel when mommy and daddy tell you that you are 'special' because you were adopted?"
- * "Many kids feel 'weird' inside when they are told they are 'special.' Have you ever felt that way?"
- * "What do you think it means to be adopted by God? It means that He loves you just as you are. You don't have to be 'special.' Just be yourself. That is how we love you too."

Maybe your child is one that enjoys the words "special" and "chosen." But then again, maybe he isn't feeling that way and is afraid to tell you. I write this to give many adoptees a voice for their feelings so that parents can at least be informed about this sensitive topic.