

Honestly ADOPTION

MIKE & KRISTIN BERRY



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Honestly Adoption

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WHY *HONESTLY* ADOPTION?

Dear friends,

We are so excited that you have decided to join in this conversation. Our hope in this book is to ask questions and share perspectives that further the conversation and open the door to new ways of thinking.

These questions have come directly from our readers, and they have prompted many thought-provoking conversations in our home. We have been married 20 years and are the proud parents of eight children, all of whom are adopted. We have two sons-in-law and three grandchildren. We were foster parents for nine years and have had 23 children enter our home over the past 17 years. We have both worked in church ministry as our profession.

Mike began writing full-time five years ago, and Kristin left her job in late 2017 so we could work together. Writing and speaking about foster and adoptive parenting has been a dream job for both of us. We are learning and growing each day as parents, and we want to share what we learn with others.

These pages have been a joy to write because our readers have contributed to the content in such a tangible way. We first started writing about adoption because we knew our family was different from those around us. We often felt alone. We began to write about our experiences as a hobby, but the response to our writing was overwhelming.

We were not alone, and others didn't need to feel alone either. Over the years we have used this platform to connect with other families like ours. Here we can share resources, encouragement, and lessons learned.

Adoptive families are unique, special, beautiful, and amazing. Adoptive families are also formed because of loss. Because of that initial loss, adoptive families also have a toughness that sets them apart. We are committed to writing about adoption honestly. We choose to remove the filter that adoptive families often feel inclined to place over themselves. We desire to share the raw reality of what adoptive families encounter so those around us feel less alone. When we honor the hard parts of this journey, we can also celebrate the deep beauty that lies in the perseverance of our children because they are what this is all about. We ask questions and seek answers because we love our children. We learn and grow as parents because our greatest honor is to parent our children, and our deepest fear is that we won't do this role justice.

We also strive to respond to questions without judgment toward those who ask. Some questions are difficult to respond to because they feel judgmental toward the child, parent, or caregiver. Sometimes the question itself assumes an inherent negative personality flaw. Many questions never get answered simply because they feel negative. We will do our best here to rephrase questions in a way that brings dignity to all who are associated with adoption.

Once again, thank you for joining us here.

With encouragement, hope, and humor,
Mike and Kristin Berry

Part 1:

ADOPTION CONVERSATIONS



1: Should I adopt?

KRISTIN | I want to back up for a second and go back to the moment I decided to adopt. I was a preteen and had been listening in on an adult conversation between my parents, grandparents, aunts, and uncles. I was surprised to discover my grandfather had grown up in the foster care system. He was never adopted. He had siblings who were adopted and more half siblings that his father had later in life. My childlike brain saw this situation in black and white. It was wrong for my grandfather to grow up without a home, so when I grew up, I would provide a home for a child in need. Problem solved.

As I grew older, my understanding of adoption grew as well. I would like to say that I considered all the factors surrounding my first child's adoption, but I simply did not. When I was 24, I became a mom to a precious baby girl. Her birth mom chose us out of more than 50 families waiting at the adoption agency. She liked our house and our dog, and she wanted her child raised in a family of faith. She chose us to raise her beautiful, brown-skinned baby girl, and I trusted she was making a good choice. I felt confident I could raise and love this child well. As I write this, that child is entering her junior year of high school! My understanding of adoption has changed a lot since that precious tiny girl was placed in my arms. She has grown to be strong, lovely, and intelligent. She is proud of her black heritage and confident as a young woman of God. I would like to say I created that in her, but I swear it's a fluke.

My motivation to adopt was much like anyone's motivation to have a child—cute babies! I just wanted to hold a child in my arms. I wanted someone to love and hug and kiss. I wanted someone to tuck into bed at night and read stories to. When I found out she was a girl, I

dreamed of buying every dress ever made, and I did. My view of adoption was so small. I saw her, and I loved her. I loved her mom for having her and for entrusting me to raise her. I was honored and proud of every single part of being this child's mother. My motivations weren't wrong—they were just shortsighted.

At first I didn't seek out a community for her. During the first part of her life, she didn't have friends who were adopted. She didn't see teachers, peers, and community members who looked like her. When raising children, biological or adopted, it is tempting to believe that we will be enough for them. And we are—at first. We feed them, change them, love them. As children grow, they need an environment that nurtures their uniqueness and sharpens their individuality. Children need more than just a mom and dad who love them.

Should you adopt? "Oh yes," I want to scream! Yes, you should adopt. Yes, you should open your heart and home to a child! I never could have created the eight amazing children I am honored to raise. They are beautiful, unique, creative, quirky, wicked smart, and funny. They each have the DNA they were meant to have. One has a heart so loving it can hold even the saddest soul, just like her birth mom. One has the cutest dimple in her chin, just like her birth dad. One has a laugh like her birth mom. One has legs for days, just like her birth sister. One has an impish grin, like his birth dad. One has the deep-thinking soul of his birth grandmother. One has the shy grin of his birth father. One has eyes that smile, just like his birth mother. I did not give our children these things. I couldn't—they don't come from me. They are unique to our children and unique to the families they belong to.

Should you adopt? Adoption is the blending of two or more families. It isn't simply absorbing a child into your own family. Adoption is about expanding. It's about growing larger. It's about eating potato pancakes on Christmas Eve because the tradition came with the child. It's about listening to endless stories about car engines because somewhere in your 12-year-old's DNA is an interest in cars that you know didn't come from his environment. Adoption is opening your heart to a child, the child's family, the child's story, the child's past. It's about seeing the future with this child in it.

Should you adopt? Adoption is about loss—and journeying through that loss with this child. Adoption isn't just about the sweet baby you hold in your arms. It's about a birth mother who leaves the hospital alone. It's about a child who will scan the crowd at shopping malls and playgrounds looking for a face that resembles his own. Adoption is about cradling the emptiness of loss alongside the fullness of the child who rests in your arms. Adoption is about balance. It's about joy and celebration and sorrow and loss and then joy once again. Adoption is about sharing—sharing a child with a birth family who may be physically present or may be present only in the heart and imagination.

Should you adopt? Start by asking yourself these questions:

- Can I share our child with another mother and father for the rest of my life?
- Can I support our child as they process through their story?
- Can I support our child when they have feelings of love, anger, loss, or joy about their adoption story?
- Do I have the capacity to find a community of people who look like our child or who share cultural similarities with our child?
- Am I able to remember that the adoptee is the center of every story and that he or she is the hero, not me?
- Can my heart stretch and celebrate a child whose strengths, characteristics, and personality may be very different from mine?

2: Should I foster?

KRISTIN | “I’ve been thinking about foster care for a long time. I would just love them too much—I couldn’t give them back. I don’t know how you do it.”

She shook her head and rolled a small rubber ball toward my foster

son. His face lit up with joy as he reached for the ball. A wide grin spread across his face as he lifted the ball over his head and tossed it with satisfaction toward his developmental therapist, who continued her monologue about foster care.

“I mean, look at him.” She gestured to the child’s happy face. “I’m just going to take him home with me and keep him!” She laughed, and I put my arms protectively around his small shoulders. With no awareness of the tension building around him, he shook my arms free and grabbed for the ball again.

I clenched my teeth and breathed in deeply through my nose before answering, “Well, he already has a home and two moms and two dads who love him very much,” I said flatly.

“Oh, you know what I mean.” She giggled again.

“I do know what you mean. I used to feel the same way about foster care. I was always passionate about children needing families, but I have discovered something else. Sometimes families just need support. This little child has a family, and they are doing their best. Have you thought about what becoming a foster parent would really mean for you?”

“Not really...what do you mean?”

Before we decide to foster, we must face the reality of what fostering actually means. Foster families are a temporary Band-Aid while a larger situation is being mended. Those who choose to foster are taking on a thankless and heartbreaking role. They will be at the mercy of the court system, a caseworker’s discretion, and the birth parent’s capability. Foster parents will fall in love with the children who enter their home. They will hug tiny bodies close and tuck them into warm beds. They will pat small hands as they walk away from courtrooms without the children’s mothers. They will feed hungry bellies and pick nits from lice-ridden hair.

Foster parents will calmly wait while a child who has lost everything rages and then weeps with longing at losses most of us cannot comprehend. Foster families will walk children proudly to their first day of kindergarten and cheer as a child scores a goal on her soccer team. They watch in wonder as the 16-year-old young man learns to drive the

family car. Foster families will celebrate Christmas and birthdays. Foster families will turn just in time to see a tear leak from the child's eye as they realize their other family is missing the celebration.

Foster families play a role in supporting the family, not just the child. Hours in waiting rooms beside a mother whose deepest shame has just been laid before a judge will open the window to a relationship one never thought possible. As love for the child grows, understanding for the birth family often grows too. Generational poverty, simple mistakes, mental illness, emotional poverty, and years of abuse become intertwined with the story of the child living in your own home.

As foster parents, our hearts are pulled like putty in directions we never thought possible. We love, and our hearts are broken. We feel anger, only to have that anger turned toward compassion. We fight for children and families that were previously unknown to us. Sometimes we win, and sometimes our fighting nature is silenced and smashed.

Foster families learn to open doors to places, people, and ideas we never knew existed. We learn cultures, language, and traditions that make us richer people. We foster because we value the preservation of family and the safety of children. We enter spaces that at first seem foreign, and we often recoil. Sometimes these spaces are unsafe, and the next time we look at the face of the child in our care, we see them through the clearer lens of their past. Sometimes these spaces are just different, and when we walk away, we see that love can live in all types of places.

Foster families learn to hold on and let go in the same breath. We constantly live the balance of these two extremes. We let go as we watch a child leap into his mother's arms. We let go as we listen to the teen tell stories of her father and what life was like before prison or addiction or the lost job. We let go, but we also hold on. We hold on to the parts of the child's story that are too heavy for them to bear alone. We hold on to the resting child in our arms. We hold on to the memory of the one who returned home. We hold on to the sorrow for the one who ran away just before her eighteenth birthday. And we hold on to the one who stays forever.

So the question is, Should I foster? Not everyone should. Some are

not able to, and that is okay. Or you may feel the need to in your inmost being. The thought of families pulled apart keeps you up at night. The thought of caseworkers sleeping in their offices because there isn't an open foster home for a child they had to remove plagues your soul. If you hear the pain and still see it as a challenge, if the fear of what may happen stirs a fight in you that you didn't know existed, foster care may be just the place you are needed.

Here are a few questions to ask yourself before beginning the foster care journey:

- Can I put a child's needs above my own?
- Can I put a family's needs above my own desires?
- Can I persevere in the face of hardship?
- Can I keep my cool when caseworkers, judges, Court Appointed Special Advocates, or biological family members make choices I don't agree with?
- Can I rejoice with a mother whose child returns to her even while my own heart breaks?
- Can I find a good therapist, pediatrician, school, and community to support this child?
- Do I have a good support system around myself?

3: Should I foster to adopt?

KRISTIN | Mike and I sat in the car outside a cute little cafe. The rain had been pouring for days, and even our bones felt chilled. We watched couples duck their heads and run toward the warm glow of the front door. We were waiting for a break in the rain as we studied the faces of those entering. We were looking for the young couple who had asked us to meet with them that Saturday morning.

They wanted to talk about adoption. They were full of life, wonder, curiosity, and excitement. We were filled with reality. Our family was

going through a rough time with two of our children. We were weary and worn from navigating the foster care system, mental health-care providers, and caseworkers in hopes of helping our children heal from unimaginable trauma. It was hard to remember the hopefulness that started us on the journey in the first place.

“Don’t burst their bubble,” Mike warned.

“I won’t. Let’s just talk about the good stuff, okay?” We agreed.

We squeezed each other’s hands as we saw them enter the coffee shop. A silent prayer went up, one that we always prayed: “Lord, only Your words and not mine. Amen.”

We slammed the car doors and ran through the pounding rain into the safety of the building.

The couple sat across from us sipping coffee and talking dreamily of the child they would adopt.

“We have decided to foster to adopt,” the woman said with enthusiasm. “Do you think we’ll get a baby? I mean, I just can’t believe all the beautiful children who don’t have a home. I can’t give them back though. I just know it would break my heart. We have decided we aren’t fostering—just adopting.”

I sucked in a breath and glanced at Mike. He nodded, and the decision was made. We would tell them the hard stuff. We had seen the damage that ignorance about adoption could do to a child. We had been offenders ourselves. We can do irreparable damage when we enter foster care or adoption with ill-advised motives. When we first adopted, we were over the moon with joy. Two years later, we began to foster. We saw ourselves as rescuers, and we didn’t realize the first goal of foster care is always reunification—and that is a good goal.

We were foster parents for nine years. In those nine years, we learned that preservation of families is always the objective. Sometimes preservation meant that a child went home to mom and dad. Sometimes preservation means a child is placed with siblings or another family member. Sometimes it means open adoption, and sometimes it just means that the family who adopts the child does their best to honor the biological family of a child who can never again have a relationship with them due to death, imprisonment, or choice.

We have learned over the years that adoption and foster care are never about our feelings as parents. Adoption and foster care must always be about the child. When we first began to foster, we thought our hearts would break for ourselves, but the first time we saw the fear in a child's eyes as they were placed in our car, we began to see that this was not about us.

Foster care is living in the margin. The children are not yours...and yet they are yours. You feed, clothe, comfort, and provide for them. You are not allowed to cut their hair or travel across state lines without permission from a judge. Your entire role as a foster parent is a contradiction and a balance. Even if a child is legally free for adoption, you may still have visits with biological family and caseworkers. Your child may be a ward of the state for more than a year after you petition for adoption.

Should you foster to adopt? I don't know. We are grateful we did, but we would advise prospective adoptive parents to ask themselves a few questions first:

- Can I support a plan of reunification?
- Can I take responsibility for a child without having the authority to make decisions for that child?
- Can I love the child's first family regardless of the circumstances?
- Can I wait for years in limbo before this child is legally adopted?

4: How should I prepare to be a foster parent?

KRISTIN | Mike and I practically stumbled into foster care. Long story short, a friend of ours needed help, and to step in, we had to become licensed foster parents. We had no idea what we were getting into. We just blindly moved forward. Still, if I could go back and make the decision differently, I honestly wouldn't change a thing. We

did what was right in the moment, and it has forever changed our lives for the better.

If I could tell someone else who is considering this journey what to do first, here is what I would say:

1. *Get educated.* Ask around and find other families who are already fostering. Research online. Find the resources you will need in the future. Begin calling local agencies and ask a ton of questions. You may decide that you feel more supported by a private agency, or you may really feel called to work with a state-run agency.

2. *Gather resources for your home.* Keep an extra car seat, a portable bed, diapers, toothbrushes, and clothing in various sizes.

3. *Ask for the Lord's guidance as you take each step.* As people of faith, I can't stress this enough. For us, this is the key to all things we do in life, especially things that impact the life of a child the way foster care does.

4. *Don't be afraid to pause during the process.* Foster care can feel like a whirlwind. It's okay to take a break during the licensing process and regroup.

5. *Talk to your children and your extended family.* The final decision is up to you, but it is good to be up-front with your family as you move forward. Your children need to know that they are a part of everything you do as a family. They can be encouraged to meet other foster families. They need to know it's okay to ask any question during the process of getting licensed or when you begin taking placements. Use age-appropriate language. Identify a few safe people for your children to talk to. Our children know they can talk to Mom, Dad, or Grandma. (If they just want to share feelings, they include the dog Lucy because she is always comforting.) Safe people know accurate information about fostering, and they know your own family.

6. *Remember the goal of foster care.* The goal of foster care is always reunification. Your job as a foster parent is to care for the child until the child returns home or to an appropriate relative placement. Your job as a foster family is to support the biological family and the child. Of course, it isn't always possible for a child to return home—this is where adoption comes in. But foster care is primarily for the well-being of the biological family.