

Nature Vs. Nurture

By Melanie Chung-Sherman

How important is it for adoptive parents to integrate a child's birth name into his or her legal name (adoptive name)? Why?

A name is more than an adjective — it is a link to identity, culture, origin and lineage. A name begins to define who we are and how we are connected to others. In some cultures, naming is synonymous with a rite of passage that represents the emotional, spiritual and physical growth of an individual. In Native American culture, it is believed that a name is fluid and ever-changing as is the individual, thus a person can possess many different names throughout his or her lifetime. As adoptees, we also embody the many names that came before and after our adoption — the history and identities that represented our birth family, birth culture and former lineage. Through adoption we gained a unique inheritance of a new identity, culture and lineage, but it is important for others to recognize that our former identities are still ever-present. The debate to change or maintain all or portions of an adoptee's name has been a topic of complex discourse.

When some adoptees begin the journey of birth search and reunion one of the first documents that they request are their birth certificate and adoption records — whether they are adopted domestically or internationally. They want to see and touch the papers with their birth name. They desire to know who named them first. Many want to link their past with their present. Many adoptees have chosen to infuse their birth name into their adoptive name as adults; some have reverted to their original birth name, others may be content to leave their legal name as is and there are some adoptees that have chosen to dismiss their birth name completely. In any case, this is a both a personal and eventful decision. The act of name change should not be over generalized as an adoptee's effort to dismiss his or her adoptive family, but for many it is a renewed sense of self and emergence of identity.

Ultimately, choosing a name for a child is a personal and thoughtful decision. I have witnessed many adoptive families grapple over how to name their child so that they can be sensitive to his or her past and present. For older children being adopted, allowing the freedom and acceptance to choose their name is empowering. Infusing a portion of a child's birth name can be equally powerful when it is both meaningful and appropriate. (There have been instances where I have run across some birth names that would not benefit any person.) Your child may someday choose who they will be called and by what name — this can allow them the opportunity to openly embrace every aspect of who they are.

Looking back, at the time I was placed with my family, the common belief by adoption professionals was that by changing a child's legal name to the family name and a more Western-sounding name, it would help ensure that I would be "fit" within the community. I remember explaining to others why my name did not match my Asian eyes and appearance — particularly when I left for college. I understood that the world did not see me as Finnish-German, but as an Asian woman — though I was still as much Finnish-German as my family. After I married, I made the decision to legally change my name to reflect my birth name and fully celebrate my Korean identity. I went through the legal process and changed my original birth certificate to reflect both my birth and adopted name. My name is now an identifier for all to see. I boldly embrace all of my names — Chung, Jae Hee, C-1942, Melanie, wife, mother, daughter, sister, Korean-American and social worker.



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