

Glossary of Adoption Terms

A quick reference for the Adoption-Competent Counseling course.

Adoption has its own vocabulary, and clinicians often meet these terms in session without having been taught them. Individual preferences vary, always honor the language a person uses for their own story.

The Adoption Constellation

Adoptee / Adopted Person

A person who was adopted.

Person-first language ("adopted person") is preferred by some; "adoptee" by others. Follow the person's lead.

Birth Parent / First Parent

The biological parent(s) who conceived and/or gave birth to the child.

Terminology preferences vary. Avoid "real parents," which implies adoptive parents are not real.

Adoptive Parent

The parent(s) who legally adopted the child, assuming all social and legal parental rights.

Birth Family / Family of Origin

The adoptee's biological relatives, including siblings, grandparents, and extended family.

Adoption Triad / Constellation

The interconnected relationship among adoptee, birth parents, and adoptive parents.

"Constellation" is increasingly preferred; it acknowledges the larger network of biological and adoptive kin involved.

Types of Adoption

Closed / Confidential

No identifying information shared between birth and adoptive families. Records are sealed.

Semi-Open

Limited information exchange, often through an intermediary such as an agency.

Open

Ongoing relationship between birth and adoptive families, with varying degrees of contact.

Domestic

Adoption within the same country, through the public foster care system or private agencies.

International / Intercountry

Adoption from another country, governed by the Hague Convention and U.S. immigration law.

Transracial

Adoption across racial lines, bringing unique considerations around identity, culture, and belonging.

Kinship

Adoption by a relative (grandparent, aunt or uncle, etc.).

May involve informal or formal legal arrangements.

Key Concepts

Relinquishment / Placement

The act of a birth parent voluntarily or involuntarily losing parental rights.

Some adoptees prefer "relinquishment" as more accurate to the experience. Avoid "gave up" / "gave away."

Adoption Fog / Coming Out of the Fog

A term used in adoptee communities for recognizing adoption-related loss and identity questions that were previously unexamined.

Associated with Verrier's (1993) primal wound framework, though the experience is recognized across many adoptee accounts.

The Primal Wound

From Nancy Verrier's 1993 book: the idea that separation from the biological mother in infancy creates a lasting psychological wound, regardless of the care that follows.

Verrier's specific formulation is debated; the broader premise (early maternal separation has lasting effects) has substantial support. Counselors need not endorse or reject it to understand what a client means by it.

Search & Reunion

The process of an adoptee or birth parent seeking and potentially reconnecting with biological relatives.

Original / Amended Birth Certificate (OBC / ABC)

The original lists birth parents; the amended version reflects adoptive parents.

Adult adoptee access to the OBC varies by state.

Termination of Parental Rights (TPR)

The legal process ending the parent-child relationship, making a child legally free for adoption.

Ambiguous Loss

A loss that lacks closure or clear understanding (Boss, 1999).

For adoptees, the birth family exists but is absent, a loss that is real but socially unacknowledged.

Disenfranchised Grief

Grief that is not openly acknowledged, publicly mourned, or socially supported (Doka, 2002).

Adoption loss is often disenfranchised because dominant cultural narratives frame adoption as a positive event.

Gratitude Bind

The cultural pressure adoptees can feel to be grateful for having been adopted, in ways that make it hard to name loss, anger, or grief.

Because adoption is framed as a rescue or gift, expressing pain can feel like ingratitude. Widely used in adoptee and clinical writing.

Genealogical Bewilderment

The disorientation an adoptee may feel when biological, cultural, or ancestral information is unavailable or fragmented.

Genetic Mirroring

Seeing oneself reflected in biological relatives, recognizing your features, expressions, mannerisms, or voice in someone you are related to.

Most non-adopted people absorb this in childhood without noticing; many adoptees grow up without it. Its absence, or sudden presence in reunion or parenthood, can be a quiet but powerful part of identity.

PAL vs. HAL

Positive Adoption Language emphasizes affirming terms; Honest Adoption Language prioritizes lived experience and acknowledges loss.

Different adoptees and communities prefer different approaches.

Types of Adoptees & Related Identities

Foster Adoptee

A person adopted from the foster care system after parental rights were terminated.

May have experienced multiple placements before permanency.

Birth / Infant Adoptee

A person adopted as an infant, typically through a private domestic adoption.

Late Discovery Adoptee (LDA)

A person who learns they were adopted later in life, often in adulthood.

Term coined by Ron Morgan in 1995. Often discovered through DNA testing.

NPE (Not Parent Expected)

A person who discovers one or both presumed parents are not biological parents.

Originally "Non-Paternity Event" in genealogy.

MPE (Misattributed Parentage)

An umbrella term for anyone who discovers their parent(s) are not genetically related, including NPEs, LDAs, and donor conceived persons.

Donor Conceived Person (DCP)

A person conceived through sperm, egg, or embryo donation. May or may not know their genetic origins.

LDDCP refers to late discovery. This population is growing rapidly as IVF accounts for a rising share of U.S. births.

Transracial / Transcultural Adoptee

A person adopted by parents of a different race or culture.

Navigates unique challenges around race, ethnicity, and cultural belonging.

Kinship Adoptee

A person adopted by a relative.