

Adoption: The Long View

Episode 112 Transcript | Season 1 Best Of | Feb 1, 2021

Lori Holden, Greeting

This episode, like the podcast as a whole, is not for short-sighted people. This episode, like the podcast in its entirety, will appeal to people who want to be able to see more than one step ahead. Maybe 3 or 4 or 10 steps ahead. If this is you, you're in the right place.

What to do, how to do it, when to do it...the guests from Season 1 reveal their answers to the question I ask them all: to "boil things down to your best advice for adoptive parents about the long view."

Lori Holden, Intro

Hello and welcome to this episode of Adoption: The Long View, a podcast brought to you by Adopting.com.

Whether you've been married or not, you probably have an opinion on this question: is a wedding the ending, the happily ever after ending? When I ask that in workshops I lead, people laugh and say No. Sure, they say, the wedding is the end of the journey to the altar, but it's just the beginning of the journey of the marriage.

And that's the focus of this podcast. Once you fill the crib and are legally joined to your beloved child, your journey is not over. It's just beginning. We cover many of the things you need to know to navigate adoptive parenting over the long view. Starting with things you need to know *now*, perspectives you need to hear *now*.

I'm your host, Lori Holden, the author of the book [The Open Hearted Way to Open Adoption](#) and longtime blogger at [LavenderLuz.com](#). More importantly, I'm a mom through domestic infant adoption to a daughter and a son, now in their late teens. Let me tell you, it's been a ride. Think of any road trip you've ever taken. There are ups and their downs and it's always an adventure. You're always glad for the trip and afterward, you might on occasion, thinking, *if only I knew then what I know now*. Regarding your adoptive parenting journey, we aim to help you know now.

Lori Holden, Host

On this, Episode 12, we close out our first season. What a success it has been! I'm so grateful for all of you listening. Thank you for tuning in, for sharing this with others, and for continuing to support us and for writing in with your questions and comments. I'm also grateful for the 12 people who sat with me during this season, helping us all to delve into the complexities of adoption in a way that helps us be more comfortable and effective at the difficult parts of adoptive parenting. I've found that these parts get easier just by acknowledging them, being willing to look at them.

Wanna know how the guests have answered this question? Today you'll get the digest, the down and dirty clips for what each guest said. You may be surprised with some of the commonalities among them, and you may be intrigued by the "special sauce" brought to the table by each guest and their unique perspective and experience.

Here is what my fabulous guests have said when I asked them to boil things down to their best advice for adoptive parents about the long view. We have a transcript available so you can easily find any episode you'd like to refer back to.

First is Leah Campbell, single mom to Cheeks, coincidentally from [Ep1](#).

Ep 1. Leah Campbell

I think being open minded in an open adoption is important. And never ever putting anything in this kind of set "this is how it is" terms. Because it may not be how it is. And I think that's true. Again, parenting in general, I think that things change and evolve and move forward and you need to be willing to evolve and change and move forward with it.

And, and as adoptive parents, I think this is something I work really hard on because it's very easy to center yourself in everything. We think about ourselves and our needs, and it's just natural. But I try really hard to remember that I'm the person with the most power in this dynamic. Always. I get to make choices. I'm the one with the legal standing, and I have more power than my daughter. In this, I have more power than her mom in this. So it is my responsibility to kind of step back sometimes and give power where I can. And I think that's a really important thing for adoptive parents to remember you are in the power position. So you are responsible for not taking advantage of that power you have and making sure that everything's taken care of.

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Lori Holden, Host

Be aware of your power position. Be fluid. Things will always be evolving. That was Leah Campbell from [Ep1](#), should you want to tune in for more Leah.

Leah's advice was echoed by Dr Abbie Goldberg, a researcher on open adoption, in [Ep 9](#).

Ep 9. Dr. Abbie Goldberg

Change is the name of the game. It's part of any relationship, but it's especially relevant to openness. So being open to change, and almost expecting that it's inevitable is actually -- there is something comforting about that. That if we can just stay open to the possibility of change, that we are then less shocked when it happens.

And I think related to that is really understanding the different stages in the life cycle, or developmental period of the kid, or kids. It's important to realize that there are adoption-competent people out there to draw on for support. There may not be an adoption-competent therapist in your geographical area, but we're so lucky. Now you have so many resources online. And now in the world of telehealth, people can see people in other states and can find an adoption competent therapist or consultant somewhere else and get some input.

So I think, realizing that this is a journey, right? This is a marathon, not a sprint. And so it's sort of like picking up your sustenance when you need it along the way. As a lifelong long distance runner, this is how I like my analogies. So when you find that you need something, looking around, and maybe you're like, I can see something, right? I needed that!

You know, it's just worth staying open to the possibility that at some point, you might need some support, you might need some help.

And then there might be years that go by that you're doing fine. You're chugging along, and you really are -- you don't need anything, right. So I think just that openness and staying open and realizing the resources that we do have available to us that they can be very powerful when we do find ourselves stuck.

Lori Holden: So I hear you saying that openness means flexibility, and an ability to weather change, which is inevitable. And if the pandemic has taught us anything, it's that change happens all the time. And we adapt, and we find ways.

Abbie Goldberg: I mean, it is really shocking. If you look around, you see what people are doing to adapt and what we have adapted to and not to say that's great, but we should pat ourselves on the back for just adapting. And we all are learning a little bit about our own resiliency, and that when faced with a very challenging situation, we do find ways to adapt. We are more creative and more resilient than we might believe.

Lori Holden: Hmm. That might be the capstone of this interview. That's a beautiful note to end on.

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Lori Holden, Host

Change is the name of the game, and adoptive parenting -- indeed, parenting in general -- is a marathon, not a sprint. Dr Abbie Goldberg adds in her observation that parents are more creative, flexible, and resilient than they think, especially when challenges come along. It's a hopeful message from [Ep9](#).

In [Ep4](#), adoptee and activist Rich Uhrlaub reminds us that while adoption may look like a one-time event to parents, it's a lifelong journey for the adopted person.

[Ep 4. Richard Uhrlaub](#)

You know this seems really simplistic, but I think the answer is built into the question: approach it with the long view.

Lori Holden: I love that.

Rich Uhrlaub: Adoption is not an event. It's a journey.

Lori Holden: Yes, and you make me remember that to adoptive parents and often looks like a one-shot, a one time deal, something that happened -- but that's not necessarily the case for how adoptees feel about it right.

Rich Uhrlaub: Yeah, it's I think many adoptive parents and again rightly so because it's not easy to adopt.

I've seen so much joy. This is theirs now, mine now. This is our baby. We're gonna celebrate Gotcha Day. That may be my second biggest piece of advice. Do not ever ever, ever have a Gotcha Day.

Lori Holden: Yeah. Tell us why. I think I know. But tell me why.

Rich Uhrlaub: Do you want to celebrate a birthday? That's great. Adoptees who are willing to let themselves feel the feels and think deeply enough about it, once they understand -- I'll use this illustration really quickly. My dad used to say, in his in one of his many less emotionally aware moments, he would say, well, you cost us \$10 and you've been worth every penny

Lori Holden: Ouch.

Rich Uhrlaub: And now, and it was a joke, you know, but not not a great joke for an adoptee and some parents may be going oh my gosh, \$10 That's fantastic. You know, they just paid a record fee to the state, as opposed to thousands and thousands. But think about it now, how the money goes up and as the money in adoption goes up, the sense of commodification on the part of adoptees also goes up.

And kind of the sense of look at all we paid for you look at all we've done for you. Look at all we sacrifice for you. Therefore, it's your job as the adoptee to sacrifice your identity and your heritage, because you owe us because of how much you cost and what we invested in you.

And that's that how Gotcha Day becomes a symbol of what all that is about, is the day we acquired you. As opposed to, here's the day you were born. And I know it's another one of those things that often has good intent. We're celebrating your adoption. It's a beautiful thing. The way it lands with many adoptees is, it's a phrase that's a symbol of our commodification.

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Lori Holden, Host

Makes you think twice about Gotcha Day, doesn't it? That was Rich Uhrlaub from [Ep4](#).

Angela Tucker is also an adoptee. Here's what she has to say in [Ep5](#).

[Ep 5. Angela Tucker](#)

My biggest piece of advice really comes down to my mission to center adoptees. I'd really love for adoptive parents to listen to and take seriously the variety of adoptee voices that are out there, vulnerably and courageously speaking out.

I find that so many adoptive parents kind of pick and choose which adoptees they want to listen to once they've found our voices. And that is harmful. It seems like if an adoptee doesn't start a sentence with *I love my parents. I'm grateful for them*, then anything else they say is null and void. That an adoptive parent is no longer listening and is only concerned with or only kind of thinking *they must have had a terrible upbringing and that's why they are expressing this or that*.

That is unfair. It actually isn't centering the adoptee. It's centering the adoptive parents' feelings and their needs, before allowing us to speak. And so I really would encourage adoptive parents to listen with open ears and allow every adoptee story to be valid and true for what it is.

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Lori Holden, Host

So often what we "know" (air quotes) about adoption comes from the narrative of adoptive parents and adoption professionals. As Angela says, we must also seek out adoptee voices. That was [Ep5](#), if you'd like more Angela.

Another adoptee voice we've heard this season is author Sara Easterly in [Ep 6](#).

Ep 6. Sara Easterly

I would say again, do your best to get comfortable with the complexity of adoption. I think the more comfortable we can all be in that the less likely we're going to simplify the story or take the dynamics personally.

And the more likely we're going to be to really see our children, the full children, and convey that everything inside them is welcomed and that there's room for all of it. It's a no strings attached kind of love, and just reinforcing that no matter what you're never going away. And that's just opening the door for trust and authenticity.

Yeah, I would also say just play a listening role like you're doing right now. If you're still listening here and like Lori you're doing, listen to adult adoptee voices and...we're not always easy to hear. I will speak for myself and others, sometimes there's still some anger under there and some of that attacking energy and so I think before discounting it just keep listening just keep listening to lots of different sources and it'll be easy to sort out what is and isn't relevant.

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Lori Holden, Host

It's important for adoptive parents, says Sara Easterly in [Ep 6](#), to get comfortable with the complexity of adoption, to see the full child and be able to love without strings.

Similarly, Clemencia Deleon, a birth mom in a closed kinship adoption, talks about comfort and discomfort in [Ep7](#).

Ep 7. Clemencia Deleon

The long view of adopted parenting advice...my advice is to get comfortable being uncomfortable. There's going to be a lot of uncomfortable moments. And that's okay. Being uncomfortable is okay. A lot of a lot of growth comes out of uncomfortability. But my advice would just be to expect to be uncomfortable and to be prepared to put in the work for yourself. And then most importantly, for your child. Be uncomfortable. And then just be super mindful of your own emotions as the adoptive parent so that you can help your child in their emotional space because they're going to be there. We've got good emotions, tough emotions -- they're going to be there. And so my advice would be to be prepared to be uncomfortable and be mindful and aware of what you're feeling and why you're feeling and how you can get through those emotions in the best way possible.

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Lori Holden, Host

Clemencia advises parents to deal with our own emotions and be willing to work on our own issues when they come up. That was [Ep7](#), in case you want to hear more.

Another birth mom, activist Ashley Mitchell of BigToughGirl, offers her wisdom in [Ep2](#).

Ep 2. Ashley Mitchell

Don't give up. At the end of the day, you will have to answer to your child about how you brought them home, and about what that looks like, and about what you did to fight for that relationship with the biological parents and it's gonna matter.

And how you are able to answer that question is going to be dictated upon the work that you put into it. It's exhausting, and **it is for life**. But at the end of the day, if you can look at your child and say that you did everything that you could to make sure that regardless of the circumstance, you did everything you could to cultivate these relationships, that's what's gonna matter. That's what's gonna matter.

And so, keep fighting, keep fighting for that. I know it's hard to be in the trenches. But when you get to look at your child and say that we did this and this and have those relationships intact, that'll be because of the work that you did.

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Lori Holden, Host

Make sure that in all that you do, you can one day answer to your son or daughter, and that you can be proud and have a clear conscience for maintaining connections wherever possible. That was Ashley Mitchell in [Ep2](#).

We also heard from a birth mom -- and an adoptive mom, together -- who were both pioneers in figuring out open adoption in the very early days of it. Here are Kim Court and Linda Marie Mueller from [Ep10](#).

[Ep 10. Kim Court and Linda Marie Mueller](#)

Kim Court:

Okay, from a birth mother's perspective, the advice I would give is, don't keep any secrets. And I say that, from a lot of different perspectives, but I think thinking of the person at the center, the adopted person, I think secrets can be so toxic. And Linda touched on this before. Always wondering if you had waited until they were an adult, when they could meet their extended biological family. There's risk there, especially if, as you said, some members of the biological family have passed away, they never had those opportunities for connection.

But secrets are so toxic, and so ugly, and so awful. And so I think, steering away from secrets from the adopted person, but also from a birth parent perspective. And I know society has changed a little bit, people are way more open about things. And everything. And maybe secrets and shame aren't a huge part of this, as they were back then. But it was super toxic for me and infected the way that I parent my two daughters now, a teenager and a 9 year old. And I'm still if you can believe it, working through things in that regard. So that would be my biggest piece of advice is to be as open as you are comfortable with. And there's a difference between things that are private, and things that are secret.

Lori Holden: Exactly. And the difference is shame, right?

Kim Court: Very much so. I mean, I will absolutely 100% respect somebody's privacy, and not share a story or share something that could be hurtful or harmful. But I'm not going to keep a secret that is then going to be damaging, either for me or for anybody else involved. So I think understanding that distinction is super important and would probably be my best piece of advice.

Lori Holden: Great advice. Thank you. Linda?

Linda Marie Mueller:

Okay. I'm really thinking about this podcast and the framework of the podcast Adoption: The Long View. That's exactly the same as for parenting. It's for the long haul. So no matter what parent we are, it's our job to raise healthy human beings that will be well adjusted adults.

And so in the context of openness, how better to give your child that foundation and base all along to help raise them to be well adjusted adults. So -- and also really listen to adoptee voices. There's a lot of adoptive voices out there that are so powerful. I had the privilege of belonging into a nonprofit that gave me a lot of opportunities to listen and talk to adult adoptees all along the way. And there was a common mantra that they wanted to know their beginnings, which had nothing to do with loving their parents. But you know what? They were close, those that had parents that understood and listened to them, they were closer to those parents. So if you want to be close to your child, validate and empathize and walk this with them, allow yourself to be a safe place for them to talk to.

The story about my little guy in the middle of the night? I guess my heart is still warm to it that he felt safe to climb into bed with me and tell me that. So just be confident who you are to your child. Allowing more love in his life will only enhance his life, your life and honoring them will honor him, and will bring you all closer.

So I guess this is the final nugget. Life is short, don't miss the chance to grab all the love you can.

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Lori Holden, Host

Don't keep secrets, they are toxic. Make sure you feel safe to your child. That's the best advice from Kim Court and Linda Marie Mueller in [Ep10](#).

We hear more on that theme from Rebecca Vahle, adoptive mom and Angel in Adoption, in [Ep 8](#).

[Ep 8. Rebecca Vahle](#)

I gained so much listening to adult adoptees sharing their journey. Transracial adoptees, those that have gone through foster care, trauma-informed parenting specialists -- just wishing I would have had information sooner. And that's what led to the radio show that I did.

As far as an adoptive parent, it came from the radio show. One of the biggest aha moments I had was talking to an adult adoptee. And she said to me, I brought up adoption with my mom once and the look on my face told me *don't ever do that again*. And she stopped. She never spoke about adoption again.

Lori Holden: She shut down.

Rebecca Vahle: Yeah, she shut down. And I just remember thinking *I never want to be that mom*.

And I remember so vividly my daughter and I having a conversation, once. We were talking about counseling. I was telling her about my experiences with counseling. And I said, *your dad and I, when we found out we couldn't have kids, we totally went to counseling and did all kinds of work*. And she goes, *Oh, yeah, you couldn't have kids? I'm sorry, what does that make us?*

And I just sat there. People use that term all the time. "I couldn't have kids so we adopted." And here's my daughter saying, I'm sorry, what does that make us? And I remember thinking, *Oh, my gosh, baby girl. What do you hear when I say that?*

And she said ***that you wanted a mansion and you got an apartment.***

And I remember (1) my heart breaking that that's what she would hear and (2) being so incredibly grateful that she felt safe enough to say, *Mom, do you understand what I hear when you say that?*

And I think that is the gift of listening to the voices of the adoptees. And the gift we can give our kids as parents is complete freedom. Now, if I get triggered by that, if I have my old wounds that open up if I, whatever, I need to suck it up and deal with that later and be 100% present with her in that space and say *I am so glad you told me that.*

And I said, Well, you also give me permission to share that? And she has given me permission to share that. Because she said yeah, Mom, people say stuff like that all the time, we'll just leave it at that. You know, like, *Oh my gosh, you look like your mom (even though she's not your real mom)* -- you know, all these comments.

And I think I feel for that whole generation that didn't have a safe space to process that. And I always want to be that safe space for my kids. And I hope that I've done that. I feel like in those moments when they're willing to say that stuff and call me out that I feel like maybe I've done okay.

Lori Holden: Wow, you wanted a mansion and you got an apartment. Rips my heart when I hear that. And as awful as it is to hear it, the only worst thing would be to *not* hear it and to have it be there.

Rebecca Vahle: Yeah, think about it. I thought I was being stellar adoptive mom being all open about my counseling and stuff that I've done. And then she was like, *Yeah, nice try*, you know. And I just love that about my daughter. I have no doubt that in the future that she'll have a voice for those that don't speak about this stuff and how she can validate and say, *Oh, me too. Yeah, I felt like that.* She's got such insight. I've got multiple stories of her calling me out on stuff.

So I think that's it, Being the Safe Space dealing with their stuff. Every time I teach the Maybe We'll Adopt classes, I was like *deal with your stuff people*. Like it is that beach ball. You push it down in the water, it's going to pop up somewhere else, and it's going to get in the way of your relationship with your kids.

So I think that's key when you're building a family around this concept of adoption, that that is different. People want to say it's the same [as parenting by biology] but it's not. There's a really tough road in this space, and the more we can be real with each other, the more healing that can happen. We manage grief, we don't solve grief. We're not cured from grief, we manage it.

Lori Holden: And to be able to acknowledge that it's even there is the first step. And then to be able to give it space when the grief comes up, when the big emotions come up -- that's what keeps us healthy. That's why people go to counseling: to get unstuck. And the stuckage is -- I call it stuckage -- the suckage just from those emotions that we think they're too painful to face, so

Rebecca Vahle: Totally. And the thing is, thank God I'm a safe person, you know, to be able to say that even if there are parts of me that struggle, I can still be 100% in that space with her, and then move on and do my own counseling, because *deal with your stuff people!* It's gonna come up.

Lori Holden: That might be boiling it down: *deal with your stuff, people!*

Rebecca Vahle: It's so true. And the thing is, that our kids go through it and they see it in us. And when and whenever you've been around other people that have grieved, there is a connection and nuance that you can see that in one another. And she sees it in me and I see it in her and it's made us incredibly connected, because we stay in it together.

I remember when my mom passed away in 2008, and I was sobbing and my kids all came in and were hugging me. And my, my daughter said -- at that point she was 10 years old. She said, *Mom, we understand. We lost our moms too.* And we just sat there and cried together.

And so that sacred grief space is something that I don't think many people are willing to sit in, because it was hard. And it was hard to know that my mom would never be replaced and I will never replace their mom. They saw that in me and we all sat together and cried. And like I said she was 10...but she gets it.

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Lori Holden, Host

That was Rebecca Vahle, sharing her story of being a safe space for her daughter to share a painful thought with, in [Ep 8](#).

It's no coincidence that Rebecca has followed the same advice given by Lesli Johnson, adoptee and therapist, from [Ep11](#).

[Ep 11: Lesli Johnson, MFT](#)

And I think you're absolutely right. Sometimes it feels like it might be easier to deny or wait -- *we'll wait to talk about that*. And what I encourage parents to do, with the notion that I believe parents are their child's best advocate. Right? So get comfortable with all parts of the story and get comfortable with the fact that your family started with this incident that was separation, and there is going to be grief and loss inherent in that.

And when I say get comfortable, I don't mean get comfortable like that it's okay. But get comfortable talking about it. And if you're not, find a group or find a therapist that can help you with the language. Because the earlier parents start talking about it, the better. Because you're letting your child know, then that you are a safe place, that you can handle whatever they bring to you. And you're helping them begin to form an identity, their identity.

== And Lesli's best advice? ==

Well, I think you just said it best. I think that the adoptive family works best when adoptive parents have done their work and continue to do their work. That's my number one recommendation for adoptive parents.

Lori Holden: One of my earlier guests said something like, get comfortable with the discomfort. Don't run from it. Don't squash it down. Acknowledge that it exists and deal with it. Deal with your stuff, which is what another guest has said.

Lesli Johnson: Right. Right.

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Are you seeing the common themes here? That was [Ep11](#) with Lesli Johnson. Do your work, deal with your stuff! It's universally helpful to find ways to take care of one's mental health and to be able to face big emotions along the way. Because they WILL come. And we are up to the task.

Due to a high-profile error in a fertility clinic, Carolyn Savage of [Ep3](#), who was on both sides of placing and receiving babies, has her take on this theme.

[Ep 3. Carolyn Savage](#)

For those receiving a baby: I think the best piece of advice I can give is exactly what I've already said. Be upfront, truthful and developmentally appropriate. I think that stories can start out very simple. And then you can add details as you get older as the children as the child gets older, but truthful and appropriate, so that **there's never a big reveal**. I just don't believe in my heart that that's the best way to go. I think you want them. I don't think you want your child ever thinking that you are keeping a secret from them of this magnitude.

That being said, I think always as busy as life gets and as far away from that moment you get where you walked out of the hospital with that baby. Again, I think it's normal to experience a little bit of guilt. Figure out a way to deal with that productively. To as busy as life gets 11 years later, know that the first mother of your child is still thinking of that child every day probably, and that you want to give them what they need to continue to be comfortable with their decision.

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Lori Holden, Host

That was [Ep3](#) with Carolyn Savage, sharing her advice and her guiding principle: treat others the way you would want to be treated.

That's a wrap for Season 1 of [Adoption: the Long View](#). We'll see you soon for more captivating guests in Season 2. Make sure to subscribe on your preferred podcast platform so you know when new episodes are available.

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