

How can our adopted child's heritage be celebrated?

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Couples who adopt children of another race—either internationally or domestically—determine what aspects of the child's culture to incorporate into the family's life.

Studies show that children who learn about their heritage have higher self-esteem and a positive self-image and become emotionally healthier adults, said Karin Price, director of [Dillon International's](#) adoption education center.

Often, the aspects of a child's culture their adoptive parents can pass along depend upon where the family lives and whether others of the same nationality live nearby.



Chloe Killingsworth has both Honduran and Nigerian ancestry.

Price's adopted daughter is from Haiti. "We celebrate our family as a Haitian-American family," Price said. To deepen that aspect, the family

attends Haiti Camp in Minnesota and subscribes to a Miami-based Haitian newspaper. They visited Haiti last year, and they often eat beans, rice and Creole chicken.

Jerrod and Becky Irick believe teaching their children about their Chinese heritage is important. In fact, they took their daughter with them when they went to China to pick up their son in September.

“We were especially grateful for the opportunity to take Katy with us to adopt Jack. This gave her a chance to see China when she’s old enough to remember the trip,” Irick said. “She has a whole new set of photos and keepsakes for that purpose.”

The Iricks’ children have several other adopted children to play with in their circle. The youth minister and his wife at their church, First Baptist Church in Lewisville, also have adopted a Chinese girl. Irick’s brother and sister-in-law adopted a Chinese daughter in August, and several others in their circle of friends have also adopted from China.

Rather than concentrate on culture, Phil and Phyllis Washburn of Dallas concentrate on family. The Washburns served as International Mission Board missionaries in Tanzania 14 years. They adopted a 10-year-old girl from Lebanon and two young children from Tanzania.

Because none was an infant when adopted and family members still are living, the Washburns have helped them maintain communications with their national families.

“We worked closely with our youngest children’s parents and were close to their extended family. Their birth father died three weeks after we received them as foster children and applied for adoption,” Phyllis Washburn explained. “We continue to communicate with their birth mother and share news of our youngest children with her on a regular basis.”

They resigned from the IMB and returned to the United States to raise the children. Washburn currently is pastor of Park Central Baptist Church in Dallas. To help their Lebanese daughter who struggled with her identity, the couple found a Christian Lebanese community near their home. "She maintains some of those relationships to this day," Phyllis Washburn said.

She has returned to Lebanon once, reuniting with her birth family. "Her meeting with her birth mother did not go quite as she expected, but she stays in touch with her aunts, uncles and cousins," Phyllis Washburn said.

The Tanzanian children are reminded of their homeland just by walking through their American house. "Our home is a blend of our Tanzania time, which surrounds them with many curios and artifacts from their birth country," she explained.

But the relationships and family connections are central to their heritage. "We often talk about people we knew or memories we have of working and being close family friends with their parents," she said.

"As they mature, they remember more and more snippets of their past. We have possession of several family artifacts, a basket that was handmade by their maternal grandfather and grass mats woven by their birth mother, as well as a few other treasures."

Michael and Barbara Hickman of St. Louis, Mo., have adopted three African-American children. They are grateful for Oak Hill Baptist Church, a multiracial congregation. Their children also attend multiracial schools and have friends from a variety of cultures.

"We take opportunities to teach our children about their African-American heritage through school work, television, books and everyday life," Hickman said. "For the last two years, my family has presented a program at church to celebrate the life of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr."

Blake and Kristin Killingsworth have just completed a domestic adoption of a daughter of Honduran and Nigerian descent. “One of the neatest things that I get to do as a parent is (to) introduce Chloe to these cultures and show her what an incredible heritage she has. I get to explore with her the history of these people and discover all about her ethnic tradition,” said Killingsworth, who works for Dallas Baptist University.

Wade and Nellie Paris of Harrisonville, Mo., caution that children need to learn about their national culture at their own pace. The Parises adopted two Korean girls in the 1970s—Susan at 7 months old and Sally when she was 5 years old.

“Sometimes they were more receptive and other times they were not,” Nellie Paris said. “Take advantage of the opportunities when you can. In Sally’s case, she just wanted to shut down that part of her life. But they appreciate it now that they are adults.”

Dillon’s Karin Price recommends families seek whatever resources may be available in their areas, including churches, newspapers and magazines and cultural activities. She also suggests parents can enroll their child in basic language classes and, if possible, travel to the child’s birthplace. Congregations can help families discover local resources and provide financial gifts for travel.