



# • Adoptive Families Together • The Network

"Call it a clan, call it a network, call it a tribe, call it a family. Whatever you call it, whoever you are, you need one." Jane Howard

Fall 2005

massachusetts society for the prevention of cruelty to children



## Honoring Diversity: Transracial Adoption Issues

John Raible—a teacher, writer, and researcher in the field of multicultural education—is a biracial person adopted into a white family, as well as a parent by adoption to two boys. He met this past year with AFT Group Leaders for a training presentation focused on our responsibilities as parents to recognize, understand and respond to the needs and experiences of children adopted by white families. Below are some concrete ideas that John shared with us.

### 9 Steps to a Transracialized, Multicultural Lifestyle

by John Raible

1. *Acknowledge racism.* Break through denial, and accept that racism still exists.
2. *Recognize racism.* Learn to identify it in all its forms, at both the institutional and personal levels.
3. *Be proactive before overt racism occurs.* Join anti-racist networks of diverse families, multicultural communities, and anti-racist organizations. Make talking about racism as a normal part of your family discussions.
4. *Attend to race dynamics.* Practice monitoring your environment for examples of subtle and overt racism. Talk about your findings with your family.
5. *Respond appropriately when overt racism occurs.* Make racism a family problem, not the adoptee's problem. Develop a repertoire of coping strategies, including advocacy, education, humor, and action.
6. *Reach out, don't isolate.* Share your family members' experiences with other families, and open yourself to learning from them. Avail yourself of the rich history of anti-racism in communities of color.
7. *Immerse yourself and your family* in multicultural friendships, collegial relationships, and environments. Find solidarity to support your anti-racist actions.
8. *Keep learning.* Read literature, watch movies, listen to speakers, and follow newspapers, magazines, and web sites with multicultural perspectives.
9. *Enjoy diversity!* Involve the whole family in learning a new language and testing ethnic recipes. Celebrate multicultural holidays, attend multicultural events, and participate in anti-racist vigils and marches, and other organized activities.

# Message from the Program Director



Dear AFT Members and Friends,

As we approach the one-year anniversary of joining MSPCC, I want to share with you that AFT has been wholeheartedly welcomed into MSPCC's statewide organization. Our mission, philosophy, and perspective are valued and respected. MSPCC truly partners with parents and shares our belief that parents are the most important resource in a child's life.

Our transition period continues, however. In May, Linda Grillo, AFT's first and longtime executive director, resigned from her position as training director. I have been honored to know Linda for eight years, ever since—in my search to connect with other families like mine—several people pointed me in her direction. Back then, I was so happy and relieved to learn that AFT existed, and that Linda led a group of dedicated, smart, savvy parents who understood and shared my experiences. I became a co-leader of the Jamaica Plain group when Anne Barclay, a founding AFT member and group leader, moved on to other adventures. I soon became a member of the board of directors and, in 2001, began working closely with Linda as AFT's assistant director.

I value so very much all the lessons Linda has taught me over the years—about myself, my children, my family, and the larger community. I am grateful for the opportunity to listen and watch her advocate, instruct, and guide us all. I am grateful to Linda for her guidance and experience as AFT made the transition from independence to becoming a program of MSPCC.

Linda did an outstanding job of growing this organization, connecting to families, building a network, and having an impact in the child welfare community. She led us all—AFT staff, board members, group leaders, volunteers, members, and friends—as we collectively developed our mission and created our philosophies. Now we are all charged with continuing to move our dynamic organization forward.

Just as Linda is entering a new phase in her life, AFT too has entered a new phase. It is different. But working from the solid foundation AFT has created, we are moving forward guided by our AFT Beliefs. As program director, I ask that all of you continue to contribute and participate as you have in the past.

Our plans for this year include:

- Recruiting and training more group leaders
- Starting more AFT parent support groups
- Training more professionals, including clinicians, to better understand our children and families from our parent perspective
- Updating AFT's print materials

AFT really is a collective effort. I am pleased to announce that several longtime AFT parent group leaders—Karen McCarthy (Kittery), Clare O'Donoghue (Jamaica Plain), and Julie Rutkowski (Canton)—have recently joined us as regional group supervisors. They will also be involved in our training program, along with Michelle Novelle (Roslindale group leader), Kathy Regan (Former Board President), and Kate Golden. Judy Ashkenaz, a recent transplant from Vermont who has many years of experience doing similar work, is also helping out including volunteering as writer and editor for our print materials. Linda Grillo will stay involved as a consultant, as will Corinne Rayburn. Our AFT Think Tank, a group consisting of the board members at the time of our merger, continues to advise and guide us. As always, our group leaders continue to be resources for families and others in their local communities.

Please keep in touch. I invite you all to call me with your thoughts, guidance, and questions as we go through our changes. Call me directly at 617-587-1563 or e-mail me at [nofarrell@mspcc.org](mailto:nofarrell@mspcc.org). I look forward to hearing from you. Thank you!



Nora O'Farrell

---

**Adoptive Families Together** is a membership program that provides education, advocacy, training, and support to families, professionals, and communities about the unique circumstances inherent in the adoption experience. AFT is a network of adoptive families founded in Massachusetts by parents who understood the benefit of peer support while raising families with complex issues.

AFT families have adopted children domestically and internationally, infants and older children, kin and children with special needs. We are an inclusive organization and welcome adopted individuals, guardians, birth and foster parents, as well as professionals working in the field of adoption.

For more information on becoming a member of AFT please visit [www.mspcc.org](http://www.mspcc.org) or call **617-587-1500**.

# AFT in Action

## Access to Birth Certificates (ABC)

AFT and MSPCC are supporters of this year's Massachusetts Senate Bill #959, co-sponsored by Senator Susan Fargo and Representative John Lepper, which would give adopted persons the same human and civil right held by the rest of the citizens of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts—access to their original uncertified birth certificate.

The ABC Committee holds the following beliefs:

- **Adopted persons** have the same right to their “identity” as all other citizens of the Commonwealth. The original birth certificate is currently available to social workers, foster parents, school personnel, adoptive parents until finalization, and through judges.
- **Adoptive parents**, who are trusted with the total responsibility for the life, health, and well-being of their adopted child, can and should also be trusted with the piece of paper that documents their child's birth.
- **Birthparents** have the same right to privacy that exists for all citizens of the Commonwealth. We support birthparents' rights and are supported by birthparents in our attempt to grant adopted persons the right to their Original Birth Certificate. A birth certificate belongs to the person who is born.

## What is ABC about?

### ABC is about **civil rights**:

- The right of an adopted person to access his or her own birth certificate.

### ABC is about **respect**:

- Respect for the judgment of adopted adults—trusting them, as we trust others, to respect boundaries.
- Respect for the judgment of parents to hold their children's information.

### ABC is about **restoration**:

- Restoring this right to what existed in Massachusetts before 1974.

### ABC is about **returning** Massachusetts to the forefront of child welfare policy setting:

- Alaska and Kansas have always allowed this access.
- Alabama, Oregon, Delaware, Tennessee, and New Hampshire have changed their laws to allow full access.
- Ohio and Montana allow limited access.
- New Jersey, Illinois, and Washington have bills pending.

ABC is *not* about open adoption records. It is *not* about searches and reunions.

Please support this legislation by contacting your state representatives and senators and asking them to sign on to this bill. If you would like to know more about the ABC bill, please call Nora O'Farrell at 617-587-1563.

MSPCC is a private, non-profit society dedicated to leadership in protecting and promoting the rights and well-being of children and families.

[www.mspcc.org](http://www.mspcc.org)

#### **Corporate Office**

99 Summer Street  
Boston, MA 02110  
617.587.1500

#### **Chairman of the Board**

*Stephen G. Pagliuca*

#### **President and Chief Executive Officer**

*Marylou Sudders*

#### **AFT Program Director**

*Nora O'Farrell*

#### **AFT Regional Group Supervisors**

*Karen McCarthy*

*Clare O'Donoghue*

*Julie Rutkowski*

# When Your Child's Story Changes:

By Beth O'Malley, M.Ed.

*Nothing but the facts or is it nothing are the facts?*

*Elana, born in Russia, was told, "We really don't know why your birth family couldn't care for you."*

*Katie, adopted from China, cherishes an item from a birth parent: a red note that was enclosed with her blanket.*

*Peter grew up celebrating his birthday on July 7th. He believed that the reason for his adoption was the poverty that exists in Guatemala.*

There is nothing new about finding "new" adoption information—the kind that turns your life upside down and changes basic life facts. Professionally and personally, as adoptee, adoptive mother, social worker, I've learned a single truth: everything changes in adoption.

Sometimes the changes are at a child's levels of understanding, which evolves with age—for example, the day a child realizes that prior to being adopted he or she lived somewhere else (or many places) and with birth family or other caretakers. But sometimes new information emerges. The new information may be personal and specific to your child. Other times, the information affects all the children adopted from an entire country.

Adopting internationally used to mean that children and their adoptive parents would rarely have any birth parent information at the time of adoption, and no chance for any information or contact in the future. Birth parents were blank spaces on a form and lived thousands of miles away. Not the case today when, instead, families are involved with one or more of the following:

- Internet listservs where personal information is shared about particular cities, orphanages, and social conditions
- DNA testing to determine if children have biological relatives within the adoption community living in other cities, states, or countries
- Private detectives who can be hired by adult adoptees or adoptive families to gather information about birth families, foster families, and/or orphanages where children lived
- Independent translations of adoption-related documents that reveal information not disclosed or known by adoption agencies or facilitators
- Search and reunions (e.g., adult Korean adoptees—now opening up to many other countries—see resource list)
- Homeland tours

Any one of these trends has the ability to unearth or change information that can completely alter a child's life story. Suddenly the parents' answer — "We don't know why" or "We don't have any information"— is no longer true.

Thanks largely to the Internet, adoptive families can choose to seek out specific facts and information that may answer questions for their child. The debate is fast and furious as to whether or not this is a good idea, as well as whether information should be sought out only at the request and lead of an adoptee, or whether it is the role of the parent(s) to seek out information.

*(Continued on the next page)*

## Additional Resources

### Karen's Adoption Links

[www.karensadoptionlinks.com](http://www.karensadoptionlinks.com)

This website contains international birth family search resources and sibling registries for both adoptive parents and adult adoptees.

### Birth Parent Contact List:

[groups.yahoo.com/group/BirthParentContact](http://groups.yahoo.com/group/BirthParentContact)

This list is for those who have adopted internationally and are contemplating birth family contact. It is also for those who have already established contact with their child's birth parents or family.

Contains comprehensive list of professional searchers for Cambodia, Columbia, El Salvador, Guatemala, Kazakhstan, Romania, Russia, Thailand, and Vietnam. Also info on finding siblings in various countries. List is moderated and members are screened initially.

### International Birth Search Issues List:

[groups.yahoo.com/group/InternationalBirthSearchIssues](http://groups.yahoo.com/group/InternationalBirthSearchIssues)

This list is for parents of international adoptees who would like to discuss the issues related to searching for their child's birth family. This new list is focused on DNA testing issues, sibling searches, and abandoned children and is especially relevant for China adoptive families.

### Sister Far List

[groups.yahoo.com/sisterfar](http://groups.yahoo.com/sisterfar)

This is a list for parents of internationally adopted children who found (or suspect they have found) a biological sibling or twin.

### International Adoption Search Website

(Ukraine, Russia, Belarus or Kazakhstan)

[www.internationaladoptionsearch.com](http://www.internationaladoptionsearch.com)  
Adoptee and adoptive parent Anna Sternad is the US contact for families interested in searching or maintaining contact with birth families in Eastern Europe, Russia, and Kazakhstan.

Corinne Rayburn, LCSW, LMFT, a therapist who has worked with hundreds of adoptive families, always tells parents, “Our search is for [the] truth, *as best as we can ascertain.*”

So, what happens when you discover the reason for your child’s adoption is because the birth mother drank too much? Or that a note believed to be from a birth parent actually contains the warm wishes of an orphanage director who fabricated the same note for all children living in a particular orphanage? What do you do when you learn your daughter’s birthday is actually six months before the one she was given, or that your son still has three siblings living with the birth parents in Guatemala? Life just got more complicated.

If your child is still little, then you are the one to make the emotional adjustment. But how do you handle new information when your child is eight or nine? What about conflicting information? Suddenly everything that you (and your child) believed to be true is either only partially true or completely false. What can your child believe or trust about his story now? Here are some suggestions for handling situations about new or changing information:

- *Deal with your emotions.* It’s your job, as the grownup, to come to terms with whatever you learn. Even as you read this article, plan on having a crisis occur at some point in your child’s life. Plan for it by expecting your child to seek information and also to question the accuracy of it all—especially if some of it has turned out to be incorrect.
- *Predict and prepare accordingly.* How might my child handle this? Is this potentially traumatic information? Will these “life facts” have a traumatic impact on my child? Follow your gut instincts and remember—you are the expert on your child.
- *Separate your feelings from your child’s.* Remember that your child has his/her own feelings and reactions. We parents should sort through ours so that we don’t project them onto our children. For example, our children might have anger about something that saddens us, and we have to be ready to react to *their* feelings. Or, they might experience much *less* impact than we anticipate. We need to honor and validate their feelings. If we’ve sorted through our own first, this will be much easier.
- *Do your homework.* Find out if the information you do have is absolutely accurate. What is the proof? Could you be missing a nuance due to translation? If so, proceed cautiously and conservatively. Discuss the impact of translation and explain why new or changed information has emerged. Here are some possible phrases to use:

*“According to the papers”*

*“Sometimes the words in one language don’t mean the same in another language.”*

Expect all involved to go through a grieving process when new information emerges or previous information proves to be untrue. Your child has just “lost” a chunk of his or her life foundation and a belief and a piece of identity he or she has had. It is an emotional jolt. Expect regression. Give your child

as much control as possible—and remember the following:

- Have faith that time heals. At some point this new information will get smoothly integrated into your child’s psyche and story. It’s a lifelong process.
- Not healing soon enough? Maybe it’s time to connect with a competent adoption/trauma child therapist—even if you just need a short-term piece of work.
- Add a new page to the lifebook to reflect the truth and honor it as the source where all known information will be shared (at age-appropriate times). Acknowledge the change of information. Here are a few examples:

*“We thought you were born on June 22, 2001. Now the doctor’s tests show that you are six months older. Wow. That’s a big change. So we talked and talked about what to do. You decided you wanted to keep the same birthday.”*

*“Sometimes people say or do things to make someone else feel better. Even with adoption information. Your orphanage director gave us a note that was supposed to be from your Chinese mother. But now we know that the director gave every U.S. family the same note. That’s too bad. I wish your note had really been from your birth mother.”*

With regard to tough issues such as alcoholism, parental drug abuse, mental health issues, criminal activities, or incarceration, know that these issues are nothing new to many of the folks adopting children via the U.S. foster care system. There are established ways, based on your child’s age and development, to discuss a complicated birth and early life history.

For several detailed examples of ways to phrase and reframe difficult issues, refer to my book *Lifebooks: Creating a Treasure for the Adopted Child* (pages 46–59). Jayne Schooler and Betsy Keefer also have an excellent book called *Telling the Truth to Your Adopted or Foster Child*, which offers many reframes for different developmental stages.

As you continue on this journey, consider the following:

- Allow children to experience their emotions. Normalize what they are feeling. Sometimes you have to sit back and watch without trying to fix or minimize their feelings.
- Remember that children are resilient and will get through whatever they are experiencing.
- Denial can be a wonderful thing. We all have our own schedule of healing and processing.
- Congratulate yourself for having the courage to help your children find their truth!

---

Copyright ©2005 by Beth O’Malley

Beth O’Malley is an adoptee, adoptive mom, adoption social worker, and the author of *Lifebooks: Creating a Treasure for the Adopted Child*. Sign up for free lifebook lessons and a monthly newsletter at [www.adoptionlifebooks.com/signup.htm](http://www.adoptionlifebooks.com/signup.htm). Visit Beth’s web site at [www.adoptionlifebooks.com](http://www.adoptionlifebooks.com).

# Massachusetts Tuition Waiver Certificate

Massachusetts residents up to age 24, who were adopted through the DSS or were in guardianship families or foster families are eligible to receive a tuition waiver for Massachusetts colleges and universities. This waiver is **not** guaranteed for the future, but all certificates already issued will be honored when a child reaches college age.

*We encourage parents to apply for the certificates as soon as possible after legalizing adoptions or guardianships. Keep the certificate on file so you'll have it when your child reaches college age.*

The following information comes from Ron Seletsky, Subsidy Manager for the Department of Social Services:

## What does the waiver cover?

This tuition waiver covers 100% of the tuition (but does not include related school fees) for state-supported courses at all of the Massachusetts public institutions of higher education, excluding graduate courses and courses in the MD program at the University of Massachusetts Medical Center. Further, it is requested that individual campuses (which have jurisdiction over charges for non-state supported courses) apply a 50% tuition waiver to eligible students for these non-state supported courses.

## How do I apply for the Adoption Tuition Waiver Certificate?

Send a copy of the **amended birth certificate** along with a **letter of request** that includes your mailing address and telephone number to:

The Department of Social Services  
Subsidy Unit  
Attention: Tuition Waiver Certificate  
24 Farnsworth Street  
Boston, MA 02210

## How do I apply for the Guardianship/Foster Care Tuition Waiver Certificate?

Send a **letter of request** that includes your mailing address and telephone number to:

The Department of Social Services  
Adolescent Services Unit  
Attention: Ms. Allison Scott/Tuition Waiver Certificate  
24 Farnsworth Street  
Boston, MA 02210

*Please allow 6 weeks for processing.*

For more information on Massachusetts Tuition Waiver Certificates, please visit [www.mass.gov/dss](http://www.mass.gov/dss).

## Other AFT News

### AFT Group News

Our parent groups are facilitated by parent volunteers trained and supported by AFT. Regional Group Supervisors, Karen McCarthy (Northeast), Clare O'Donoghue (Greater Boston) and Julie Rutkowski (Metrowest) work with our Group Leaders, providing supervision as well as marketing for the groups.

The AFT Parent Group schedule and other information and resources can now be found on the MSPCC website at [www.mspsc.org](http://www.mspsc.org). AFT is listed under programs, both foster care and adoption.

Recent changes in groups include:

- The Wellesley group is back up and running with a new leader, Jane Martin, as well as a new date and time.
- A new Brighton group is starting this fall – contact us for information.
- The addition of several new group co-leaders including John Allen in Framingham, Linda Perry in Braintree and Jody Kahn in Portsmouth.

Also, watch for new AFT groups in Western Massachusetts starting later in the year. We'll keep you posted.

### Join An Online Group

As always, our AFT online group is very active. Our moderated on-line group provides parents with a 24-hour support forum, focusing on children with challenging behaviors and complex needs. Parents use the on-line group to seek information, share stories, gain and offer support. The group's knowledgeable and experienced parents are especially helpful to newly forming families. If you are interested in joining, email [aftlist-subscribe@yahoo.com](mailto:aftlist-subscribe@yahoo.com) to subscribe.

### Will You Be Our Next New Leader?

AFT is always looking for people interested in starting groups in their local communities. Please contact us to learn more about running an AFT Group.

# Meet A Groupie - Martha Pitt, Medway

*Martha Pitt has been a co-leader of the Medfield/Medway AFT group since 2003.*

My introduction to adoption came when I was about 9 years old and, after waiting impatiently through my mother's pregnancy, I had a new baby sister. About the same time, I heard news about family friends—a previously childless couple who, I learned, now had two children! I knew that we had seen this couple during my mother's pregnancy, and so I immediately realized that these children had come to this family in a different way than my sister had arrived. I was fascinated, and from that moment, I knew adoption could be a possible future option for me.

Thirty-three years later, in 1994, after suffering through what felt like an interminable wait for children, my husband and I became pre-adoptive parents. We had attended our MAPP training and were pretty well convinced that *our* children wouldn't have any serious issues like those we had heard about. What we didn't know about trauma and attachment issues would have filled volumes. I started going to meetings, conferences, and trainings related to adoption. I didn't realize it yet, but I was desperate to hear from others who were having similar experiences to ours. I needed support and some new ideas.

I connected with Adoptive Families Together early on, attending meetings in Milford, Natick, Wellesley, and Weston. Then a couple of groups closed, my schedule changed, and I was left without a group.

Linda Grillo had been bugging me for years to become a group leader. Early in 2003, she invited me to a leaders training group. By this time, my busy life had slowed down considerably, and AFT had adopted a co-leader model. In the fall of 2003, Freda Shapiro and I started a group in Medfield.

Our group has taken a while to get established, but now our meetings typically have six or more people, mostly adoptive parents, and some of our regular participants are exploring different ways to talk with their children about adoption.

We've had one social event so far, a bowling party with five families, including children ranging in age from toddler to teen. One of the leaders took a group photo and handed out copies at the next meeting. History in the making for our group! And isn't that a huge part of being a parent—creating history for our children?

For some adoptive families, starting a conversation about adoption with their child can be a challenge. How and where do you begin? If only there were some magic way to get over that initial hurdle. Well, we don't know any magic, but our hope is that for some families, these group events may serve as "icebreakers" to help get dialogue started. If nothing more, at least they remind us that we are not alone—we are not "the only ones."

*The Medfield AFT Group meets on the second Thursday of each month, 7:00 - 8:30 p.m., at the Medfield Public Library, 468 Main Street. The fall dates are November 10<sup>th</sup> and December 8<sup>th</sup>.*

---

## AFT Program Recap 2004-2005 Accomplishments

AFT continued to strengthen and grow our parent support programming. Monthly parent run support were held in 11 communities in Massachusetts, 2 communities in New Hampshire and one community in Maine.

From July 2004 through June 2005, our Parent Support Group totals included:

131 parent groups were run by AFT  
674 of parents attended parent groups

Four of our groups provide concurrent childcare.  
145 of children participated in childcare

13 families were in pre-legal adoption status  
87 families had legalized adoptions

55 families adopted through DSS  
45 families adopted privately

Another 590 hours of telephone and family support, information and referral were provided by AFT parent coordinators and staff.

3 Annual AFT Leader Meetings and Training Sessions were held with these training topics:

- Attachment and Trust
- Difference and Cultural Competencies
- Compassionate Language

AFT staff presented at 15 trainings and conference workshops for parents and professionals, with close to 300 people attending.

AFT produced a new handbook written by Linda Grillo: "Choosing Adoption - A Parent Perspective," a guide for parents and professionals.

## We invite you to join

AFT Member benefits include:

- Tri-annual issues of *The Network*, AFT's informative newsletter.
- A copy of *In Their Own Words*, a resource for parents and professionals.
- The *AFT Presents* educational pamphlet series.
- Joining a network of parents and professionals committed to supporting and educating each other and the larger communities about our children.

## ·Adoptive Families Together·

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Title: \_\_\_\_\_

Organization (if applicable): \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

City, State, Zip: \_\_\_\_\_

Home Phone: \_\_\_\_\_ Work Phone: \_\_\_\_\_

Email: \_\_\_\_\_

### Your Connection to Adoption (Check as many as apply)

- Adoptive Parent
- Adoptive Person
- Adoption Professional
- Birth Parent
- Foster Parent
- Guardianship
- Kinship
- Pre-Adoptive Parent
- Sibling
- Other \_\_\_\_\_

### Select type of membership desired:

- \$55 for a one year membership
- \$100 for a two year membership
- Organizations - AFT will contact you regarding member benefits and fees.

### Here is my tax deductible contribution:

- \$25
- \$50
- \$100
- \$500
- \$1,000
- Other \_\_\_\_\_

Please make check payable to MSPCC and mail to:  
MSPCC/AFT, 99 Summer Street, Boston, MA 02110



·Adoptive Families Together·  
99 Summer Street  
Boston, MA 02110