

Origins of the Term Birthparent

How "birthparent" came into the lexicon is simpler than it is made out to be sometimes.

In the spring of 1976, after attending several Orphan Voyage meetings in Massachusetts, I phoned an adoptee named Betty Mattison. I discussed with her the possibility of forming a group to address the needs of parents who had surrendered children for adoption. I thought the group could also stand tall against the claims that we parents wanted to be kept from our children.

Betty asked me what I would call such a group. First, I discounted some terms. "Biological parents" was OUT; we were more than procreating protoplasm. So was "natural parents"; adoptive parents said it made them feel unnatural.

"Birth parents," as two words, had been used before by authors Arthur Sorosky, Reuben Pannor, and Annette Baran in a publication. Though it hadn't yet developed any traction in the lexicon, "birth parents" as two words was acceptable to me. It didn't hurt adoptive parents and, to me, "birth" added the missing "more" to "biological parents". As I considered the term more deeply, I realized the term "birth parents" pointed to an amazing process; that is, to a whole lot of "feeling" that birthing mothers have pre-, during, and post-natal. The "birth" process itself also conveyed history. There was social history for the birthing mother; she was continuing a ritual that had preceded her since the beginning of time and that was, even now, being performed by unknown sisters elsewhere around the world. Through the birthing process, we mothers also conveyed to our children the combined personal and genetic histories of ourselves and the fathers'. The amazing constellation of birth connected us forever to our children. Betty and I were warming up.

I ventured "Birth Parents United in Concern". I then quickly realized the acronym would be "BPUIC". "Sounds like a car with hiccups", I said to Betty and tried again. It occurred to me that I could combine "birth" and "parents" into one word, which would make it like "grandparent". I loved (reader: insert caps and neon to the word "loved") the parallel to "grandparent"; it underscored the legacy we offered our children. However, the acronym was still "BUIC", and still sounded like a car.

So, I switched the potential group's name around: "Concerned United Birthparents". And, Betty and I lit up like the grand finale of fireworks. "CUB" was born (with the imagery of protective mother and her cub) and, along with that, the term "birthparent".

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