



Together by choice not heredity

by Belle Frejillana Ramirez and Tang Hau Ling

A family picture of the Hilliards taken in early 2009.

Adoption is a special way of forming a family, by choice, rather than biology. However, like other families, adoptive families have both happy and difficult times.

“My wife and I are not blood-related but we are a family because we choose to be together forever and we choose to be together with our kids forever,” said Pastor Brett Hilliard, who has adopted four children.

While two of his children Abby, 14, and Hudson, 12, are from the United State, the other two, 9-year-old Mary Grace and 7-year-old Zane are from mainland China. Despite the difference in nationality, all the children get along well with each other. “They don’t see Chinese or whites. They see brothers and sisters,” said Mr Hilliard.

According to Mr Hilliard, the family treats adoption as merely a

label that physically describes the characteristics of a person. “For example, you have brown eyes. I have blue eyes; you’re a biological child. They were adopted,” said the United States citizen who has lived in Hong Kong for over seven years.

However, Mr Hilliard expressed his concern for people who do not know the right way to talk about adoption. “I would like to help people learn the way to normalise it (adoption). It is not a stigma. It is not the second-best way to form a family,” he said.

Mr Hilliard gave some examples of good expressions to use when talking about adoption. Instead of “real parents”, it should be “biological parents”; instead of saying the biological parents “gave up the child”, we may say that they “made an adoption plan for the child”.

All the Hilliards’ children knew they were adopted since they were

babies. The parents told them stories, like children who adopted a puppy and taking care of it forever, in order to help them understand what adoption is and their love to them even though they are not biologically related.

There was a time when Mrs Hilliard took her third child to school, her classmate asked her where she found a foreigner to be her domestic helper. Mr Hilliard said his daughter just openly explained to her classmate that she was adopted from China and the “domestic helper” was her mother.

“We have a good relationship with our kids and she’s (Mary Grace) really proud of us. So it’s not like she’s embarrassed about having a white mom with blue eyes,” said Mr Hilliard.

Yet, not all adopted children are openly to talk about their adoption. A 13-year-old girl who was adopted by another pastor in Hong Kong is no longer

“My wife and I are not blood-related but we are a family”

willing to tell others about her adoption as she enters her teenage years.

The pastor, who refused to reveal his identity, and his wife are Hong-Kong-born Canadians and they married in Canada. After the couple failed in their first attempt at artificial fertilization, they adopted the girl from mainland China when she was nine months old. Their daughter is fully aware of the fact that she was adopted.

The family lived in Canada until they moved to Hong Kong when the girl was four. After coming back to Hong Kong for almost 10 years, the pastor spotted the cultural difference between Canada and Hong Kong in regard to adoption.

The former computer engineer said when his daughter was in kindergarten in Canada, she brought her pictures taken in China during the adoption and told her classmates about her adoption.

“After listening to her story, her classmates would clap their hands. It was a positive reinforcement that she was being accepted. People (there) just treat adoption as a normal thing,” said the pastor who is in his late 40s.

“But in Hong Kong, when my daughter told the others she was adopted, people would respond with disbelief. So, very soon, she learnt that adoption may not be a good thing,” said the pastor.

His daughter who is now in grade eight in an international school no longer takes the initiative to tell others about her adoption. She even asked her parents not to tell people whom they newly met about her adoption.

“She wants to keep it as a secret and is not as open as before,” said the pastor, who added that peer pressure may be one of the reasons accounting for her attitude change, as some of his daughter’s classmates even told her that her biological parents did not love her.

“The school needs to provide more education (on adoption) and the culture needs to be changed,” said the pastor, who is quite sad about the situation.

Adoption is not limited to children from mainland China. According to the Social Welfare Department (SWD), as of the end of 2008, there were 88 children adopted locally while 133

families were still undergoing the adoption process.

A local couple who identified themselves as Mr and Mrs Hui adopted a boy in 1997 when he was three months old and a girl in 2002 when she was one year old.

According to Mr Hui, the adoption procedure in Hong Kong is very thorough. First of all, the couple had to join an orientation course conducted by the SWD. Then, they not only had to fill out questionnaires and application forms, but also had to submit documents to prove they were physically and mentally fit.

After that, they had to go through interviews and home visits. Moreover, they were required to have references, from friends who have known them for a long time, and the referees would also be interviewed by the SWD officials.

After the application is approved, the SWD matching panels match the children to families according to the families’ preferences. “We can set our own preference for the sex, age, health condition of the child and so on,” said Mr Hui.

Brett Hilliard first met Zane Hilliard in the orphanage in December 2005.



(From left to right) Abby, Mary Grace, Zane and Hudson Hilliard are having their family trip in Thailand in the summer of 2007.

Zane Hilliard is celebrating his second Christmas with his family in 2007.



COURTESY OF BRETT HILLIARD

Mr Hui said the demand for adoptive girls was much higher than that of boys in Hong Kong according to the SWD. “The whole (adoption) process only lasted for six months in our first adoption, but we had to wait around two to three years for our girl and we almost gave up because we were already in our 50s at that time,” he said.

Mrs Hui said it is an exhausting job as a full-time mother of an 11-year-old boy and a seven-year-old daughter who always test her limits, fighting for attention, concern and love.

Mrs Hui said the two children were both hyperactive and it was very difficult to raise them, particularly on the academic side. “I run out of patience too,” said Mrs Hui who takes up tai chi and swimming to release tension.

Despite the fact that their children get out of control occasionally, the parents both said they never regret the decision of having their children. Their children know about their adoption but rarely talk about it.

“In fact in a way we are proud to be adopted parents,” said Mr Hui. “There is no point to hide because it is a fact,” added Mrs Hui.

However, not all adoptive parents choose to tell their child about their adoption in the first place.

A 46-year-old adoptive mother, who is not willing to reveal her name, has yet to tell her son about his adoption, though many in the family and their friends already know about it. The kindergarten teacher adopted her son

when he was two months old. “He has grown up to be a sweet and loving kid,” said the mother of the eight-year-old.

“I know I must tell my son and explain to him about his adoption,” said

“If you are open and you perceive adoption as a very positive thing, why don’t you tell your baby?”

the mother. “I hope I can find a suitable moment to tell him the truth, at which he is really mature enough, able to analyse sensibly and get ready to accept it.”

The mother said she is under great pressure as she could not predict how her son would react after knowing his adoption. She is afraid her son would say things like ‘you are not my mum, no wonder you beat me when I am not studying hard.’ The mother said, “I am not sure if I can handle it well.”

When there were times that the adoption was almost revealed by unexpected events, the mother felt even more frustrated.

The mother recalled that it was a sports day and his son had to bring his birth certificate with him. However, that of an adopted child is different from the others. Moreover, his son could read the word “adoption” written on it.

“I was so worried at that time. I even used sticky tape to stick the certificate together,” said the mother

who is a Catholic. She finally left it to God to see whether his son would know about his adoption. “It turned out nothing happened. My son did not say anything about it at all,” she said.

Although she has no exact schedule when she will tell him, the mother said she wants to be the one who tell him. For the time being, she said her task is to teach her son to be a critical-minded person.


Stella Chin Sin-kwan, a social worker of the Mother’s Choice, encourages adoptive parents to tell their children about their adoption as early as possible, such as the day they bring them home.

“Adoption is another way to form a family. They are just the same as other families,” said Miss Chin. “Parents’ attitudes are very important. If you are open and you perceive adoption as a very positive thing, why don’t you tell your baby?”

Nonetheless, Miss Chin said people in Hong Kong generally lack education about adoption. Therefore, it is important for the adoptive families to be role models to change the misconceptions of others.

“I came across a case which all of the classmates of a nine-year-old adopted boy knew he was adopted. One day, one of his classmates said to him, ‘I want to be adopted too! Your mum treats you very well’,” said Miss Chin. “People will see. We want adoptive parents to be the educators,” she added.

Mother’s Choice provides support groups to adoptive families, such as adoption parenting class. The class explores different aspects of adoption, including how to talk to children about adoption and looking for one’s family roots.

In addition, there are some other support groups, such as Adoptive Families of Hong Kong and the Happy Parents Association, which are for English-speaking and Chinese-speaking adoptive families respectively. 

Number of newly adopted children and families waiting for adoption

	2004-2005	2005-2006	2006-2007	2007-2008
No. of Adoptive homes placed with children (DSW wards) with Adoption Order granted	104	99	86	88
No. of Adoption applications still pending for matching with children (DSW wards) as at end of year	87	92	108	126

Source: The Social Welfare Department (SWD) 2009