

Adoptive Parents Address Awkward Questions People Ask

When Nikki and Erik Vonderhaar began the adoption process three years ago, they had no idea how much it would change their lives. Today their daughter Zoe beams, reflecting the love that nurturing parents and so many friends shower on her.

Yet even in a highly diverse area like Washington, D.C., the Vonderhaars present a family picture not everyone understands. Why would two upwardly mobile young professionals open their hearts and home to adoption?

After sharing how they came to receive Zoe into their family, they relate the everyday challenges—and unexpected surprises—they've experienced together.

Bound4LIFE: Because adoption is counter-cultural in our day, it can lead to inconsiderate remarks. Could you share some of the awkward questions you've received and how you respond?

Erik: It does happen! We get those less often now, but we've had some good ones, especially when she was smaller.

Nikki: I was at the grocery store—obviously, Zoe and I don't look the same. We're checking out and the cashier said, "Oh, she's so cute. Does she look like her dad?"

All I could reply was, "You know, I have no idea." When it lingered a little bit, she had this look of horror on her face. "She's adopted," I clarified and smiled.

So our response is usually with humor or lighthearted sarcasm. It helps people think about what they're saying versus us being offended by it. People often don't know or understand adoptive families and if we can help educate them, that's great. Our responses may change as she gets older; maybe

she'll have that bright sarcasm herself, who knows?

The best book I've ever read on adoption is *Come Rain or Come Shine*—even if you're not facing a transracial adoption, it's worth a read. The author talks about how you may think people come up to you because they're put off by your adoptive family; but really, most people ask questions out of pure motives or because they want to be helpful.

When people offer advice on Zoe's hair, braiding and so on, I don't get offended; I'm thankful for it. Mostly, I get compliments on her hair, which makes me feel so good.

Erik: If you assume people are approaching with a good heart—no one's trying to be mean—then even comments we could take as inappropriate become a good conversation starter.

Nikki: An awkward comment that we've heard when we would tell people that we were adopting is, "Oh that's great, I have friends who adopted and then got pregnant!" as if adopting would somehow result in us getting pregnant. Although well-meaning, it can be wearing on a couple pursuing adoption.

The best thing someone can do is to affirm and support the unique calling of adoption God has placed on your hearts. We prayed about this, we heard from God and we're moving forward. Our point is not to get pregnant; our point is to do what we felt God said to do.

Erik: I really do think they're trying to be encouraging, but what they're saying without realizing it is: Adoption is second best. They give anecdotes that imply: "Don't worry, you guys will get pregnant too and have a 'kid of your own.'"

Zoe is our own, and adoption is not a "consolation prize" to having a biological child.

Bound4LIFE: This leads us naturally to a new chapter now unfolding in your story. Could you share the latest news and

how it's changed your life?

Erik: When Zoe was about a year old, we found out we were pregnant again. Considering the multiple pregnancies that had not worked out before, we were stressed about it to be honest. It was difficult to think about going through another miscarriage.

We were preparing ourselves for an emotional rollercoaster rather than being really joyful about it. With our history, the OB/GYN characterized this pregnancy as high risk.

Then we hit the baby's 10-week mark, then 12 weeks—we're now just a few weeks from the due date and her doctor is saying everything is going great!

Nikki: This is the first pregnancy where we knew early enough to be able to take corrective action. The doctors prescribed certain medications that would help keep the pregnancy on course.

As we've progressed through this pregnancy and things have gone well, some of the fears and anxieties that we initially felt have subsided.

Erik: It's only been fairly recently where we have let ourselves fully have that attachment to the baby and begin to dream about his future. The doctors keep telling us that the measurements are right where they need to be and everything is lining up perfectly, praise God.

Nikki: We spoke earlier about how God gives us the desires of our hearts. One thing I always wanted was children close together in age.

Through Bethany, you have to wait until you have your first adopted child for a year before you are able to start the process for your second adoption. Then you have the same potential wait time, anywhere from 1 to 3 years.

Before Zoe turned 1, I remember us talking: “Let’s wait to restart the adoption process, we’re enjoying our time with Zoe.” We didn’t feel the urgency to start the adoption process as we did the first time around.

Shortly after that, we found out we were pregnant! Only God could do that; there wasn’t any other way possible for our children to be close in age.

Bound4LIFE: Are you sensing that Zoe is going to enjoy being a big sister?

Nikki: We sure hope so! She’s pretty nurturing; one of the ladies in the nursery told me, “Zoe is so sweet, she always keeps the nursing moms company. When my newborn was crying, she offered him her pacifier.”

I think Zoe may have a hard time sharing me and not always being the center of attention, but I’m sure she’ll adjust.

As I’m going through this pregnancy, when I’m exhausted or in pain, often I think of Zoe’s birth mom. We’ve had so much support, yet she faced very different emotions through her nine months of pregnancy.

It inspires me to pray for her, and for all birth mothers who courageously give life—the most amazing gift to an adoptive family.

Bound4LIFE: For Christians who desire to support adoption, what are some practical steps they can take?

Erik: If someone is really interested in supporting adoption, learning more is step one. One book, *Adopted for Life*, gives practical biblical insights—an overview of what adoption is, and drawing the parallels of God adopting us as His children.

Many misconceptions about adoption exist, such as adoption being second best to having biological children; those ideas

can keep families from welcoming precious children into their homes. Growing your family through adoption is just as amazing as having biological children; both are truly a great adventure.

Nikki: It's important to understand closed versus open adoption.

Erik: With closed adoption, you have no contact with the birth mother; in a very open adoption, the birth mother may essentially be a part of your family with lots of interaction with parents and child.

Our adoption is somewhere in the middle: We don't know many personal details about Zoe's birth mother, though we do have contact a few times per year. We seek to involve her in big moments, sending short videos when possible through our contacts at Bethany. We're going to try to meet up periodically, where she can spend time with Zoe and see how she's doing beyond seeing photos.

Nikki: To support adoption, it's a big deal if you can do what our church friends did when they ran the yard sale—start to finish. It took away a huge burden; I still get emotional thinking about it. It really helps the adoptive family know people are supporting them.

Erik: In a practical sense, adoption can be a long and expensive process. Any kind of financial support is vital. One event can make a big difference, as we saw when that yard sale brought in between \$3-4,000.

Nikki: Dear friends of ours have welcomed foster kids into their home, which involves many meetings with counselors, caseworkers, potentially reconciling with family and so much paperwork. Our friends see this as an opportunity to minister the love of God both to kids and parents, who may then reconcile and reunite with their children.

If you know a family involved in foster care, make them a meal when you can, or volunteer to babysit their other children when a meeting comes up—with foster care, they often have little advance notice of schedule changes.

While ours was a private domestic infant adoption, families who grow through international adoption or foster care may face different challenges. The child may have emotional attachment issues, recurring nightmares or other trials to work through, so be aware and look for ways you can love them well.

We see an adoptive family sometimes and think, “Yay, they’re finally a family!” as if everything will be perfect right away. But becoming a healthy, functioning family is going to take work. Having friends who help with prayer and everyday tasks is really vital.

*After 10 years on staff at The Heritage Foundation and Focus on the Family, **Josh M. Shepherd** currently serves in communications at Bound4LIFE International—a faith-based pro-life organization. He and his wife, Terri, reside in the Washington, D.C., area.*

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