



**HEART GALLERIES**  
**OF TEXAS**

# Words Matter

A guide on adoption  
language



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## Introduction

Language is fluid, with words taking on varied meanings for different individuals. As we learn new concepts, our language undergoes transformations. Thus, the terms people use can change over time.

In the realm of adoption, it is important to honor the language preference of the person who has directly experienced adoption. Using the language they prefer shows we listen, we value their unique insight, and we support their right to define their experience using their chosen words. We want our language to heal, not harm.

Therefore, inclusive adoption language moves away from using public or even professional terminology and shifts to using the language of the person with lived experience. This involves discussing preferred language with the individual, as it can vary from person to person.

## Language Considerations

**Inclusive adoption language aims to be sensitive by letting go of outdated terms and the perspectives that uphold them.**

In the past, children in foster care were referred to as “orphans” or as “children who need families.” Orphans is an outdated term meaning “without parents.” However, children in foster care have parents, families, and family history that is very important to them. They have a cultural identity that has shaped them. When we deny that children have families, we negate their history, culture, and identity.

Because society viewed children as orphans without parents, it naturally evolved that children in foster care were also in need of saving. However, since we know children have families, we also want to shift the salvation narrative.

Instead of This:	Consider This:
<p>We have to keep children safe.</p> <p>We have to save children.</p>	<p><b>We can support families to meet the needs of their children.</b></p>

**Why?**

If we view ourselves as rescuers, we might not see the inherent strengths of biological families. This mindset can make us think removing children is the only solution and can hinder reunification. When we see our role as supporters, we are more likely to cultivate solutions to help families meet the needs of their children.

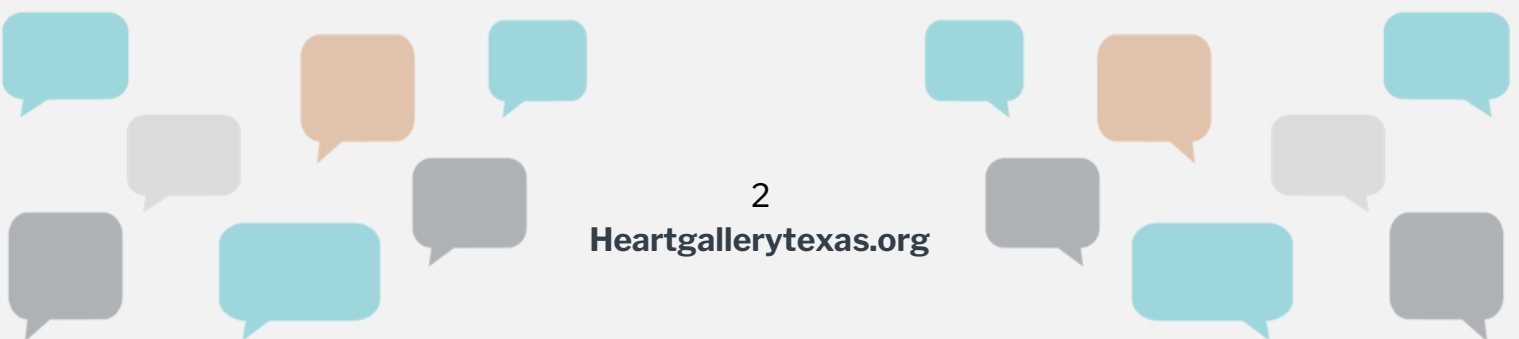
Even if reunification is not possible, and the outcome is adoption, we are not “saving” the child. We are fulfilling their needs for love, belonging, and connection. Saying a child needs saving implies they are a problem to fix. In reality, they need ongoing support throughout their lives just like any other child.

While adoption is intended to be permanent, we want to choose our words with care when describing the family experience.

Instead of This:	Consider This:
<p>Forever families</p>	<p><b>Family</b></p> <p><b>Lasting connections</b></p> <p><b>Relational permanency</b></p>

**Why?**

Youth who have been adopted have biological families who have shaped their identity. Suggesting that the family who adopted them is their “forever family” erases the impact of their biological connections.



**Inclusive adoption language is person-first or person-centered.**

Person-first language centers the person by highlighting their identity over a situation they are experiencing that is beyond their control.

Instead of This:	Consider This:
Foster child	<b>Child/Child in foster care</b>
Foster youth	<b>Child who has experienced foster care</b>
Foster kids	<b>Child within the foster care system</b>

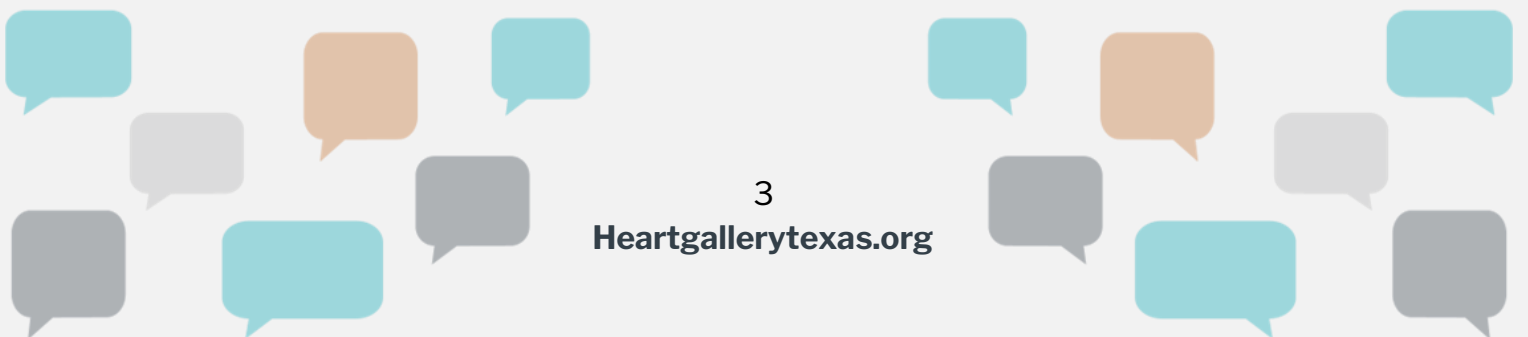
**Why?**

Foster care may describe a child’s living situation, but it is not the only thing that defines them. They are children first, with hopes, goals, and dreams. They deserve to be defined by who they are rather than their experience.

**Inclusive adoption language avoids deficits-based language.**

Deficits-based language depersonalizes the individual. We see them based on the label we attach to them as opposed to their full personhood.

Instead of This:	Consider This:
Abused children	<b>Children who have experienced abuse or neglect</b>
Neglected children	
Vulnerable children	



**Why?**

Referring to a child as abused, neglected, or vulnerable is reducing them to a label. It distracts us from seeing their full personhood. They are children who have hobbies, interests, values, and goals. This terminology also stigmatizes the biological parent. Although they struggled to meet the needs of their child, they have often contributed a wealth of strengths, resourcefulness, and resilience.

**Inclusive adoption language considers the needs of the person with lived experience.**

In adoption, the person with lived experience may be a youth in foster care, a youth who has been adopted, a parent, a foster caregiver, or a parent who has adopted.

Instead of This:	Consider This:
Abandoned Given up Unwanted	Surrender a child for adoption  Termination/ transfer parental rights

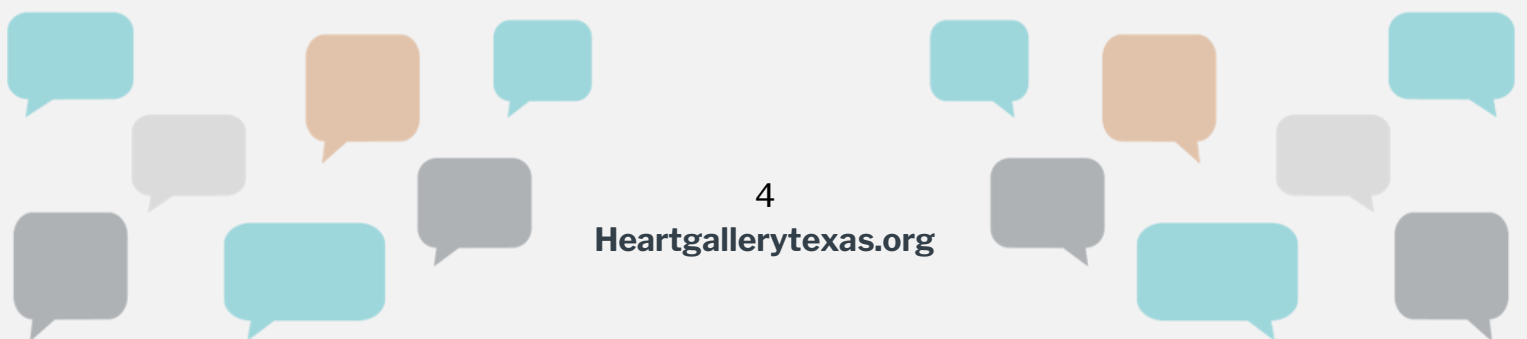
**Why?**

Parents are navigating the situation the best they can and do not always control what happens to their children. To say they abandoned their child or do not want them suggests a complete disengagement and disregard. Parents typically love their children and want what is best for them.

Instead of This:	Consider This:
To keep a child	To raise a child

**Why?**

“Keep” implies ownership, as if the child is an object that can be either “kept” or “given away.” Raising a child, on the other hand, is a more nurturing word that emphasizes the supportive role of parents in providing love, care, and connection.



Instead of This:	Consider This:
Real parent Natural parent Natural mother/father/family	<b>Parent/ mother/ father/ family</b> <b>Birth, biological, or first parent/ mother/ father/ family</b>

### Why?

It is not necessary to put qualifiers on parents. A person is a parent, even if they are not the primary caregivers. If the situation requires a specification of their role, it is important to ask them how they prefer to be addressed.

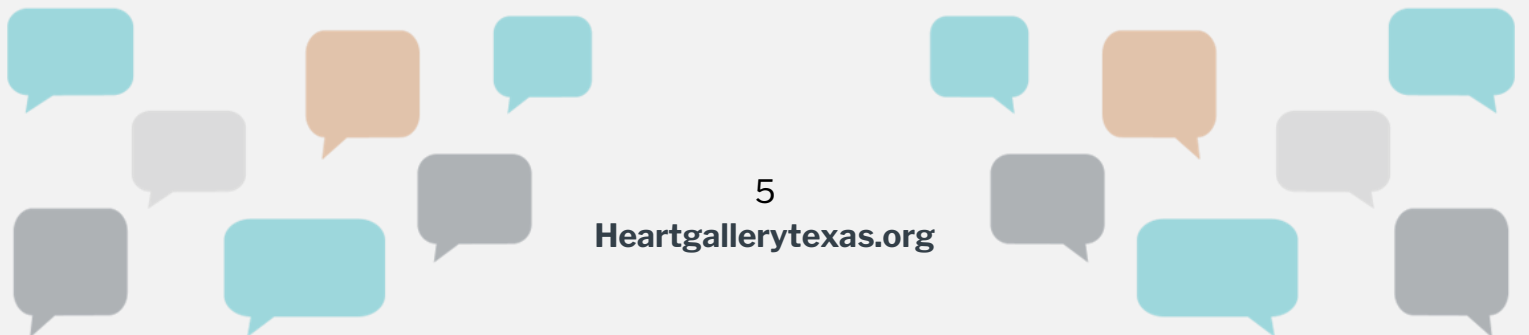
It is important in documentation and direct communication with biological parents to address them by their name rather than “birth mom” or “birth dad.” This acknowledges their individuality, fostering consideration, respect, and dignity.

Instead of This:	Consider This:
Adoptive parent Adoptive mother Adoptive father	<b>Parent/ mother/ father/ family</b> <b>Parent who adopted</b>

### Why?

Constantly emphasizing the term “adoptive” may stigmatize or differentiate parents who have adopted from those who have not. Using neutral language without

qualifiers helps normalize diverse family structures and avoids distinctions. If the situation requires naming a specification of their role, it is important to ask them how they prefer to be addressed.



## Conclusion

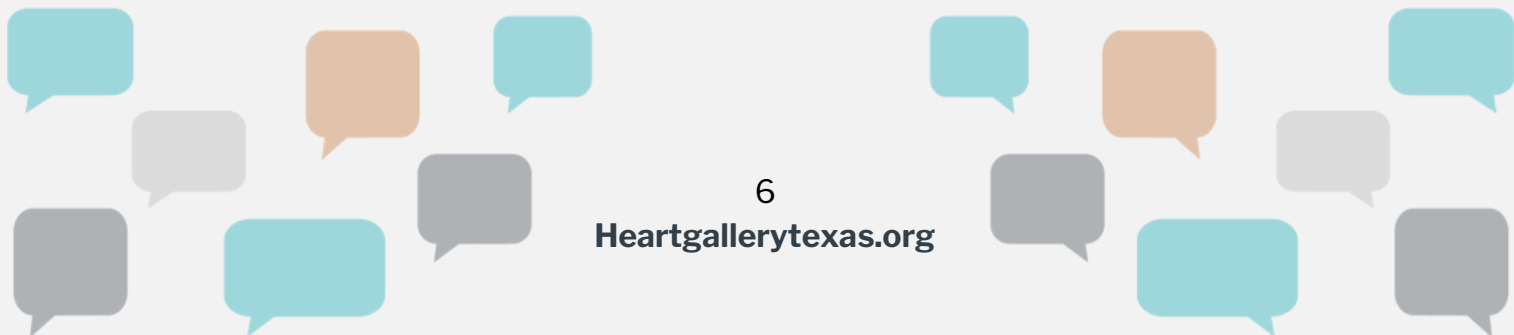
How we communicate about youth and families impacts how we perceive and interact with them. The language we use also impacts how youth and families see themselves.

These guidelines provide a general framework for language use. However, it is essential to recognize that individuals with lived experiences may employ terminology outside these suggestions. Respecting the individual with lived experience entails using the language they prefer during interactions with them.

If you are not sure what term to use, just ask. If you make a mistake, be committed to learning and adjusting your language as needed.

## Related Resources

- [Language Tips](#)
- [Person-Centered Language in Child Welfare](#)
- [How does the language used in child welfare impact families?](#)





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