



LEARNING FROM LIVED EXPERIENCE

BEYOND DATES AND DEADLINES: LEVERAGING THE CALENDAR FOR CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE ADVOCACY IN CHILD WELFARE

By April Dinwoodie

Like it or not, managing our calendar is something we all have to do in one way or another. Growing up as a Black/bi-racial transracially adopted person who was named two different months (June and then April), neither one of them the one I am born in (October), I have a unique relationship with the calendar. In the early years, my connection to the calendar was generally transactional and I had little sense of what certain times of year might actually mean to my identity, my relationships, and my sense of belonging. Over time, I have come to learn that being separated from my family of origin and connected to a new family through adoption, meant that some days like Mother's Day, Father's Day, and my birthday, while celebratory in some ways, were also confusing and emotionally activating.

Today, after having investigated the layers and done very deep personal healing, I have come to learn that leveraging the calendar as a tool can be a gateway for parents, caregivers, and professionals to proactively make space for the unique experiences of children and youth that are separated from one family system and enfolded into another through adoption, foster care, and guardianship.

Here are some very practical ways that today's child welfare legal professionals can leverage the calendar to move from the transactional to the transformational.

First, we must understand a child's and young person's calendar before there was a separation from the family of origin. We need to know what happened in their life, and when, in order to get a sense of an overall arc from their happiest to their hardest days. With this information, the new caregivers they are entrusted to can be aware of the joys and the pains that dot the calendar.

The timestamp on something that happened in a child's life is not simply what is written in a file. It is also what that child felt on or around those days and what emotion

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:



For nearly 30 years, **APRIL DINWOODIE** has been both a branding and marketing executive at corporations including Nine West, Kenneth Cole, J.C. Penney, and JetBlue as well as an adoption, foster care, and racial justice advocate. April was a featured plenary speaker at NACC's 46th National Child Welfare Law Conference online. Guided by her lived experience as a transracially adopted person, April is fiercely dedicated to being part of a collective effort to face and embrace differences in order to find even more purpose in our work with children and families. April created and hosts *Born in June, Raised in April: What Adoption Can Teach the World!* a podcast about identity, family, and differences of race, class, and culture. Learn more about April's work at aprildinwoodie.com.



LEARNING FROM LIVED EXPERIENCE — CONTINUED

and connection they carry with them as a result of what happened during that life event. For far too long, the archiving of events for children and youth engaged in child welfare have become a series of occurrences and facts instead of being understood as impactful moments that may need softness as their anniversaries replay over time. And as professionals and parents learn about a child's past and put the necessary archive together, they should do so with the thought that the child or youth they are writing about might one day read what they write.

Next, along with the details of the timeline, there needs to be a curiosity of the culture and lifestyle of the child's family of origin. Professionals and caregivers can ask questions about what holidays were celebrated (and how) and can gather the important days in a family system including birthdays, anniversaries, and family traditions that will not show up on our universal calendars. These days that are important to a family, especially parents' birthdays, can be grounding for children and youth. Too often, they become missed opportunities for growth and awareness. Even if there is no way to know the birthday of the parents that a child is born to, adoptive parents and caregivers can work with a child to pick a day that honors the child's parents of origin.

Even when access to some information cannot be obtained, there is still a way to honor the simple fact that there are countless people that share in a connection to the child. And as we do this, there are simple ways to tie a child to the best parts of themselves that may have been inherited while also managing the elements that they may not embody, and do not have to, simply because there is a genetic connection. Ensuring a healthy identity for children and youth begins with acknowledging the truth in age-appropriate ways; adults have a responsibility to guide this process with care, grace, and with a centering of the child, not their own comfort.

Another important and useful aspect of the calendar is our ability to set aside time. Given the complexities of life and the added layers that may come as we advocate for others, seeing the calendar as more than mechanics can be beautiful and practical. As we schedule meetings, activities, holidays, and special days we can also think about how we want to proactively make time and space for intentional conversations about the uniqueness of family related to foster care, adoption, and guardianship. While we know that sometimes the best conversations happen unplanned, reserving time for these meaningful connections will make sure these important moments are not missed.

And finally, as professionals, parents, and caregivers work to use the calendar as a tool to love and support the children and youth entrusted to them, making time for our own personal care and self-love must be a priority. Think about your anniversaries, special days, and life moments that you want to honor and celebrate. And in addition to that, make sure you are marking the times of the year that will be harder or more challenging. Could you send a reminder to a friend or loved one that you might need some support on a particularly tough day? Sometimes the best thing you can do is to show children and youth that it is okay to take care of oneself. Combining all of these tactics and tools can create a pathway to transformation and offer the love and support we all need 365 days of the year. ■