When Fear Gets in the Way: Embracing Open Adoption

By Mari Itzkowitz, LCSW and Ellen Singer, LCSW-C

Mr. and Mrs. Brown had been foster parents for several years. During this time, they had hoped to adopt Devon, one of their foster children. With terrible grief but understanding, they coped with having that child return to his birth mother. One year later, Johnny, 3, had been removed from his mother's care because of neglect and placed with the Browns. As the months went by, the Browns fell in love with Johnny and hoped they might be able to adopt him. As it was, while Ms. Marshall, Johnny's birth mother never failed to attend the monthly visits with Johnny that took place at the local Dept. of Social Services, it was clear that she was not able to make the changes that would allow Johnny to be returned to her care. Ultimately, the plan for Johnny was adoption.

During visitation, the Browns met Ms. Marshall. Interactions between them were always positive and respectful and Ms. Marshall was always appropriate with Johnny. Ms. Marshall felt that Mr. and Mrs. Brown would be good parents for Johnny and agreed to voluntary termination of her parental rights with the understanding that there would be an open adoption agreement. To everyone's surprise, the Browns refused to negotiate an agreement. No amount of discussion could persuade them from their belief that such an agreement, meant to protect Ms. Marshall's right to continued contact with her son, would undermine their rights as parents. Without this agreement, would they allow contact with Ms. Marshall? They were noncommittal.

Mr. and Mrs. Hall adopted siblings - Alicia, 7, and Brandon, 6, placed in their care at age 4, after allegations of sexual and physical abuse by their birth mother's boyfriend. They had agreed to continued contact with their children's birth mother, but there was no open adoption agreement. Like Ms. Marshall, the children's birth mother had been faithful with her visitation and had developed a positive relationship with the Halls. However, shortly after the adoption was finalized, Mr. and Mrs. Hall moved out of state with no intention of continuing contact with their children's birth mother.

Adoptive parents, Tom and Lisa Smith, and birth maternal grandmother, Betty Jones had an open adoption arrangement around Steven, age 3, who had been voluntarily placed at birth by Steven's birth mother in a privately arranged adoption. The relationship between Tom, Lisa and Betty was going extremely well until Betty asked Steven to call her 'Grandma Betty' instead of just "Betty". The Smiths objected to this request and told Betty that Steven needed to be clear about who is "family" - that he had his two sets of "grandparents," and that they needed to make sure that Steven would never be confused in knowing that he was a "Smith", not a "Jones.". Tom and Lisa also told Betty that they worried that perhaps she was in denial about what "adoption" means. Afraid of losing her relationship with Steven and the Smiths, Betty
decided to hide her hurt. Tom and Smith offered a compromise - Steven would call Betty, 'Auntie Betty' - since close female family friends were given the privilege of being called "Aunties."

In each of these scenarios, it is clear that FEAR of some kind played a huge role in the decisions that adoptive parents made with regard to relationships with birth family. In our work with adoptive and birth families, we find that exploring the root of these fears is critical to the well-being of everyone involved in an adoption. In this way, parents can reflect more honestly about whether the decisions they make about post-placement contact are truly being made around the best interests of their child(ren).

WHY OPEN ADOPTION?
The fact is that, today, closed adoptions (domestic) are rare. Most adoption arrangements involve some type of post-placement contact in the form of letters, e-mails, phone calls and in-person visits. While still controversial, the movement toward open adoption is based on the belief that continued relationships have benefits for all parties involved. Research conducted on open adoption supports this belief.

WHAT THE RESEARCH SAYS
In open adoption, birth parents who cannot raise their children suffer the loss of their parental role, but not the loss of a relationship with their child. Because they know how their child is doing, their guilt and grief around relinquishment is not complicated by having to live with excruciating uncertainty as is the case in closed adoption. Research has shown that birth parents who choose the adoptive family and who have continued contact and/or knowledge experience lower levels of grief and regret, and have greater peace of mind with their adoption decisions.

For adopted children, the ability to maintain relationships with birth families mitigates the degree of feelings of loss, rejection, and abandonment. Knowledge of one's roots contributes to positive self-esteem, healthy identity development and a sense of well-being. The longitudinal study by Harold Grotevant and Ruth McCoy (The Minnesota/Texas Adoption Research Project) showed that overall, children in all types of adoption showed positive adjustment to adoption. However, the children in open adoptions spent less time engaged in fantasizing about birth families because they didn't have to. In addition, "higher degrees of collaboration between the adoptive and the birth families predicted greater socioemotional development" (for the adoptee). This longitudinal study also demonstrated that most teens who do have contact with their birth mothers are satisfied with their open adoption arrangements, while the majority of those who don't have contact, wish they had more.

FEARS AND CONCERNS
Unfortunately, intellectual understanding of the benefits inherent in open adoption is far easier than a person's emotional readiness to embark on this journey. For one thing, adopters who have faced infertility and treatment usually feel emotionally depleted. They may fear that continued contact with the birth family will undermine their sense of feeling like "real" parents. In fact, the study conducted by Grotevant and McCoy in Openness in Adoption showed that over the course of time, contact with the birth family did not negatively affect the adoptive parents' sense of entitlement - defined as the feeling of having the right to parent and a sense of authenticity.
Other adopters may fear the hard work it takes to preserve openness in these unique relationships, as even the most successful ones may not be without challenges. Relationships between birth and adoptive family are unlike any other relationship a person may have experienced. Building trust is a process that takes time. That is why the thought of relationships with birth family can feel so scary, so overwhelming for many prospective adoptive parents. It is understandable to have a knee-jerk reaction of "Maybe I'll agree to letters, but that's it!"

Nancy, mother of 16 year old Allyson by adoption and 24 year old Daniel (by birth states, "We may have been more scared about adoption than most - having already parented a biological child and certain that no child could compare, but we certainly couldn't imagine what it would be like to meet a birth mother, let alone continue contact with her. We were totally terrified at our first meeting with Robin. When we realized that she was scared herself, we calmed down and truly wanted to help her feel comfortable. We really liked her, and meeting her helped us to step into her shoes. At first we thought we would only write letters, but over the years, our relationship progressed to visits. Instead of fearing her, we came to respect and admire her for the courage and strength it has taken for her to remain in Allyson's life."

Sometimes it is extended birth family members who develop the relationship with the child, typically grandparents or an aunt, such as in the case of the Smiths and Ms. Jones. Cindy and Steve's birth granddaughter, now 5, lives with her adoptive family far away. Because of the distance, visits occur about twice a year. Even though it seemed strange at first, Cindy now feels like the adoptive family is really like extended kin. "The truth is that this relationship really developed because of Amy (adoptive mother). She helped expand our definition of 'family.' She has been so welcoming. I really like Amy's parents, too, and we all have such a good time during these visits."

MAKING OPEN ADOPTION WORK
As with all healthy relationships, these unique relationships require good communication and the ability to set appropriate boundaries, convey mutual respect, and demonstrate good problem-solving skills. Relationships work best when the decisions about the nature of the contact are respectfully negotiated between both parties, and when there is an understanding that agreements may be renegotiated over the course of time. When conflict or difficulties occur, it may be because one or more of these necessary skills needs shoring up. More often it is related to grief - around infertility for the adoptive parents, and relinquishment for the birth family. Often, resistance to contact is related to the adoptive parents' wish to protect their children from the "unknown" - from the complexity of emotion that accompanies relationships with birth family.

Adoptive parents also, of course, may close adoptions to protect the child from what is known. Sometimes it is not in the best interests of the child to have visits with birth family. There are situations where physical and/or emotional safety is at risk. However, adoptive parents must still help their children with the truth of their adoption stories, and maintain connection with appropriate boundaries. Mary, adopted by her parents at age 4, traveled with her family to meet her birth family when she was 14. The two families had kept in contact via letters, and Mary's adoptive parents felt ready to let Mary meet her birth family. Several of Mary's older siblings had been in foster care for many years, as the birth mother had a long history of drug and alcohol abuse. During the visit, birth mother and several siblings denigrated the adoptive family and told Mary lies. Only one sibling set the record straight. Mary has continued contact only with that one sibling. While birth mother and the other siblings want contact, Mary does not feel ready to
pursue this at this time. She imagines that perhaps in the future she will be able to work things out with her birth mother and siblings to move beyond this impasse.

Adoption is certainly not a one size fits all experience. Neither are the complexities involved in open adoption relationships. As the trend in adoption continues to move in the direction of openness, we invite you to join us for our upcoming webinar, Taking the Fear Out of Open Adoption: What it is and What it isn't, when we will discuss what BOTH adoptive and birth families need to know to develop positive and comfortable relationships with each other. The webinar will address:

- Responding to challenges that arise
- Opening a closed adoption
- Making decisions around frequency and other matters pertaining to visits
- Handling boundary violations or inappropriate communication (e.g. secret communication via the Internet)
- When birth family members cease contact
- Cultural and other differences between adoptive and birth families
- Extended adoptive family members' relationships with birth family
- Maintaining connection when contact is not possible or desirable
- Grief and loss

The webinar format allows ample time for individual Q and A. If you prefer, you may also e-mail us a question you would like us to address during the webinar at caseadopt@adoptionsupport.org.


Dear Ellen,

The story in the news of the 23 year old woman who reunited with her birth family after discovering she was a victim of kidnapping by the mother who raised her has struck a nerve with everybody in the adoption community. The horror, sadness, happiness, and complexity of what happened are the reasons this story has gained national attention. For those of us connected to adoption, it brings up many issues. First of all, it is not uncommon for children to wonder if they were kidnapped as they strive to make sense of why they were placed for adoption. As they cope with feelings of
loss and grief, they may believe they were placed for adoption because they were bad in some way. Or they may "blame" their birth parents. Or they may "blame" the adoptive parents. At C.A.S.E, we have had children tell us that they wondered if they had been kidnapped. A few years ago, during a training I conducted for the staff at a school, a guidance counselor told me that a 10 year old boy had come into her office and shared this very concern.

Television shows and movies contribute to this belief. Many cop and legal dramas center their plots around abduction as do soap operas. This was the plot of the 1999 movie, Deep End of the Ocean, with Michelle Pfeiffer. In these stories, sometimes the adoptive family doesn't know that the child placed with them had been abducted.

It is important, therefore, that adoptive parents always be aware of how this theme plays out in fictional stories, let alone real life drama. Bring it up to your children. Let them know that this theme is not uncommon and that you wonder if the idea of being kidnapped has crossed their mind. Reaffirm the legal process of adoption that you went through to complete the adoption. If your child remains anxious, show them the paperwork pertaining to the finalization of their adoption. If your child or teen is not aware of this current media story, it is better to hear it from you. It is highly likely that a friend or peer has heard about this young woman, and might be the one to share it.as in "Gee, do you think you were kidnapped?"

We always encourage parents to look for any "natural" opportunity to use as a door opener to open up dialogue about adoption. In this case, discussion of this story can lead to more fruitful discussions - away from "kidnapping" to thoughts, feelings, fantasies, questions about birth family, - providing an excellent opportunity to talk about adoption. Some children do not ask questions about adoption, and those parents must take the lead to bring the subject up -- to send the message to their children that parents are there to talk to - that the child/teen does not have to "go it alone" on the journey to make sense of adoption.

The story of the reunion is, of course, even more emotional in this story because of the terrible circumstances. However, the expression of loss and grief by the birth parents and the young woman resonates with the adoption community because loss and grief is part of every search and reunion story. On the Today Show, the birth father, in wishing he could recapture all the father-daughter experiences, jokingly/painfully said that he wondered if he should feed his daughter baby food. While possibly strange to people not connected with adoption, those of us connected with adoption understood his sentiment.

While I won't comment on the perpetrator/"non-biological" mother, I believe the birth father indicated that his daughter's ('adoptive') extended family did not know of this crime, and he understands the challenges his daughter faces around having two families. The work ahead for this woman is, of course, complicated by the crime of abduction, but it is not unlike the work all adoptees face in reunion as they integrate their new birth family relationships into their identities, their lives, and their adoptive families. We wish this woman the best of luck in her new journey and hope she finds an "adoption-competent" mental health professional to assist her. We also want to wish Oprah Winfrey and her sister, Patricia- (9 years younger, placed for adoption at birth - unbeknownst to Oprah until last November) who she was recently reunited with. Remember that your child may also be aware of Oprah's story - you can use this as well to open discussion.
A HUGE THANK YOU TO THE UNIVERSITIES AT SHADY GROVE CONFERENCE AND EVENT SERVICES OF ROCKVILLE, MD AND MELISSA MARQUEZ FOR DONATING A ROOM FOR THE LEAP HOLIDAY PARTY LAST DECEMBER. The party was a great success thanks to our partnership with The Universities at Shady Grove.

Message from CEO: Calling All Adoptive Parents and Adopted Persons: Please take our survey on what does "Adoption Competency" mean?

Dear Readers,

According to adoptive parents, one of the greatest post-adoption support needs is mental health services provided by someone who knows adoption. The Center for Adoption Support and Education is looking for adoptive parents to help define, in their terms, what adoption competency means—better assess the term consistently reported by adoptive parents and professionals alike. In 2008, we began an important project funded by the Freddie Mac Foundation, The Dave Thomas Foundation, Annie E. Casey Foundation, Casey Family Services, Center for Effective Child Welfare Practice and the Kellogg Foundation to 1) define what "adoption competency" in mental health services really means, 2) to identify the specific adoption competencies that therapists should have if they are going to provide support services to adoptive families, and 3) to develop a post graduate training curriculum for therapists based on the competencies, and to train mental health professionals to be adoption competent in their clinical practices. With the expertise of a National Advisory Board and key adoption researchers and practitioners, we have achieved the aforementioned goals and now are ready to replicate the project nationally.

In the early development of this work, we were fortunate to have the input of adoptive parents. At this time, we would really appreciate your feedback. Over the years, I have been honored to travel across the country to train professionals and parents. I heard the desperate need for qualified adoption competent providers and the wish that C.A.S.E could come into your communities. One day, maybe we will have the resources to do that, but for now, we must find a way to build the capacity of the mental health providers to have the requisite knowledge to support you and your children. I would be deeply grateful if you would kindly take a few minutes to complete this survey, and also pass it on to other adoptive families you may know. Your input is essential to the success of this initiative. Your feedback can impact the allocation of resources and direct policy, as well help to ensure that everyone who needs adoption competent services has access to them. To complete this survey, please visit: http://www.surveymonkey.com/s/98NLFDP.

Thank you so much for your help!

Debbie Riley, CEO, The Center for Adoption Support and Education.