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## EMBRACING OPEN ADOPTION

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*While contact between birth and adoptive families is also growing in both international and public domestic adoptions, this article addresses voluntary adoptions arranged through private independent or agency adoption.*

After four years of infertility treatment back in the 1980's (before IVF treatment was standard practice), my husband and I adopted our then-two-week-old daughter in May 1987 from an agency in Chicago. I was relieved that my daughter's birth parents chose not to meet us and did not want any continued contact. I thought I was so lucky. Having begun in the 80's, I had heard of open adoption and chalked it up to those 'crazy' Californians who were always involved in things that were "different, edgy, and nonconformist." Being someone who is not too adventurous, and somewhat risk adverse, I was quite content to be involved in a much more common, closed adoption arrangement. But truth be told, I just wanted my baby. Infertility was a devastating, traumatizing, miserable experience. I just wanted to feel normal again. I just wanted to be a parent.

As a clinical social worker and adoptive parent, intent on increasing my knowledge of the psychological aspects of adoption, it was less than three years later before I understood that I wasn't so "lucky", and that those "crazy" Californians were spearheading the challenge to traditional adoption practice – for very good, very important reasons. But again, truth be told, I was ready to learn this lesson because I was a parent and adoption was no longer about fulfilling **my** needs, but learning how to best meet my daughter's needs.

The fact is that 30 years later, closed adoptions (domestic) are rare, and most adoption arrangements involve some type of post-placement contact in the form of letters, e-mails, phone calls and in-person visits. (Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute "Safeguarding the Rights and Well-Being of Birth Parents in the Adoption Process" by Susan Smith, Nov. 2006). The movement toward open adoption is based on the belief that continued relationships have benefits for all parties involved. Though there has been criticism of some of the "scientific methodology" involved in the research on open adoption, nevertheless, the research that has been conducted supports this belief.

In open adoption, birth parents who cannot raise their children suffer the loss of their parental role, but not the loss of relationship with their child. Their guilt and grief is not complicated by having to live with excruciating uncertainty – without knowledge of how their child is faring, 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

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regret, and have greater peace of mind with their adoption decisions. (Evan B. Donaldson (Safeguarding the Rights and Well-Being of Birth parents in the adoption Process by Susan Smith, Nov. 2006,)

For adopted children, the ability to maintain relationships with birth families mitigates the degree of feelings of loss, rejection/abandonment. Knowledge of one's roots contributes to self-esteem, healthy identity development and a sense of well-being. The longitudinal study by Harold Grotevant and Ruth McRoy (The Minnesota/Texas Adoption Research Project) showed that children in all types of adoption overall 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. (Openness in Adoption: Exploring Family Connections by Harold Grotevant and Ruth McRoy, 1998). In addition, "higher degrees of collaboration between the adoptive and the birth families predicted greater socioemotional development." (Grotevant, Ross, Marchel and McRoy, Adaptive Behavior in Adopted Children: Predictors from early risk, collaboration in relationships with the adoptive kinship network, and openness arrangements. Journal of Adolescent Research, 14.) This longitudinal study has shown 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. (Evan B. Donaldson e-newsletter February 2007 - Child Welfare League of America Nov. /Dec. 2006 – Adolescents' Feelings about Openness in Adoption: Implications for Adoption Agencies by J. Berge, T. Mendenhall, G. Wrobel, H. Grotevant and R. McRoy.)

Adoptive parents who are able to build trusting relationships with their child's birth family avoid the typical fears many adoptive parents experience – "birth parents showing up on our doorstep", "wanting their child back," losing child to birth family," etc. (Grotevant and McCoy-Openness in Adoption). This study also showed that over the course of time, contact with birth family did not negatively affect the adoptive parents' sense of entitlement – (their right to parent and sense of authenticity.) In addition, parents who are knowledgeable about the challenges inherent in closed adoption and who believe that open adoption is in their child's best interest, may experience less anxiety about how their children will fare emotionally.

Nevertheless, intellectual understanding of the benefits inherent in open adoption is far easier than a person's emotional readiness to embark on this journey. Infertility and treatment usually leave people emotionally depleted. Furthermore, relationships require work – hard work – and even the most successful ones are not without challenges. Relationships between birth and adoptive family are unlike any other relationship a person may have experienced. There is so much to learn. There is so much fear of the unknown to overcome. Building trust is a process that takes time. That is why the thought of relationships with birth family can feel so scary and so overwhelming for many prospective adoptive parents.

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, too, was scared, 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 keep in touch via e-mail and post pictures online, 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.”*

Some adoptions are open right from the start. Others become open, at the decision of the adoptive parents, at some later point in time – often middle childhood – when their children are asking questions, including if they can meet their birth parents. Sometimes adoptions are opened at the request of birth parents. I have worked with many anxious adoptive parents who have surprised themselves by eventually concluding that this move on the birthparent’s part was an unexpected “gift.” Sometimes adoptions are opened when it is clear that an adolescent wants/needs to know his birth parents. Preparation and education is key, as it is with every stage of the adoption experience.

Every family creates its own set of acceptable boundaries. When open adoption truly involves contact/visits – the amount can vary – Some families have annual visits, some have weekly contact. Some families vacation together. Some birth parents provide child care for the adoptive family. 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 as needs and circumstances change. Of course there are birth parents who choose not to have post-placement contact at the time of placement. What is most important is that the door is left open should they desire contact at any point in the future, perhaps because they are older, more emotionally ready for contact, and/or the circumstances in their lives change.

Sometimes it is extended birth family members who develop the relationship with the child – typically grandparents or an aunt – such as the case with Cindy and Steve, whose birth granddaughter lives 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 has been so welcoming. I really like her parents, too and we all have such a good time during these visits.”*

As with all healthy relationships, these unique relationships require good communication, mutual respect, problem-solving capability, and the ability to set appropriate boundaries, etc. There is much personal growth to be gained by both parties as they work to develop empathy for each other. When conflict occurs and threatens the relationship, it is usually because one or more of these necessary skills needs shoring up. Many times the conflict reflects feelings of

grief – around infertility for the adoptive parents, and relinquishment for the birth family. In this and other instances, family therapy is advised to help resolve these impasses. I have been witness to many painful exchanges and impressed at the understanding for each other.

In recent years, I have met more prospective adoptive parents embracing open adoption. I have also seen a shift toward more adoptive parents being upset when birth parents decide not to continue contact. It is a wonderful shift. It reflects enormous growth and understanding. Whatever the reason behind why a birth parent may not be able to continue contact, birth parents also need and deserve education to fully understand their invaluable roles in the lives of their birth children. They can benefit from emotional support to handle the challenges they may encounter in remaining involved with their birth child(ren) and the family.

Adoption is certainly not a one size fits all experience. While it may be very difficult to think beyond getting through the immediate adoption process, it is extremely important that prospective adopters make it a priority to take the time to educate themselves about adoptive family life. Whatever decisions are made -- are best made from an educated/informed place. Having once “been there” themselves, adoptive parents, including those in open adoptions, are usually very willing to share their experiences with prospective parents.

#### **REFERENCES/RESOURCES**

- The Open Adoption Experience by Lois Melina and Sharon Kaplan Roszia
- Making Room in Our Hearts by Micky Duxbury
- Children of Open Adoption by Patricia Dorner
- Openness in Adoption: Exploring Family Connections by Dr. Harold D. Grotevant and Dr. Ruth McRoy
- Adoption Nation by Adam Pertman
- Being Adopted: The Lifelong Search for Self by David Brodzinsky
- Real Parents/Real Children by Holly van Gulden
- The Family of Adoption by Joyce Pavao
- Twenty Things Adopted Kids Wish their Adoptive Parents Knew by Sherrie Eldridge
- Adopting After Infertility by Patricia Irwin Johnston
- Beneath the Mask by Debbie Riley
- Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute
- [www.childwelfare.gov/adoption](http://www.childwelfare.gov/adoption)