

Open Adoption:

**What it is and What it
isn't and the How and
Why to Making it Work**

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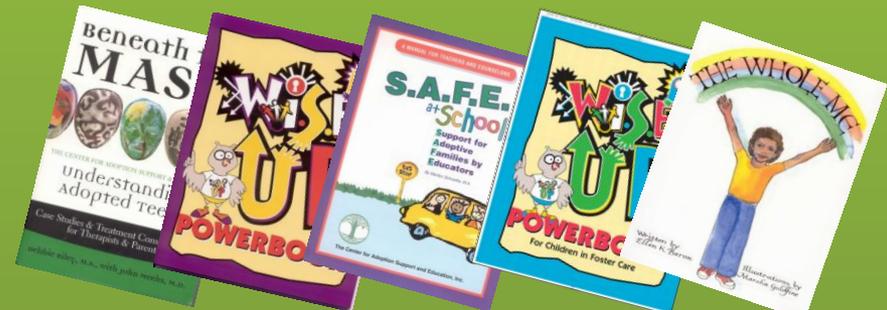
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a non-profit adoptive family support center, since 1998

With decades of experience, our mission is to strengthen the well-being of children and families of all adoptive experiences by providing them the adoption-centered services and resources they need, including:

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Myths about Openness in Adoption

- **Contact will only create emotional upset for children**
- **Birthparents had their chance and after TPR, contact is finished**
- **Children will move on and not think about their birth family**
- **Adoptive parents don't want birth parents in their lives**
- **Birthparents will move on and not think about the child they relinquished and believe that the child will live "happily ever after"**

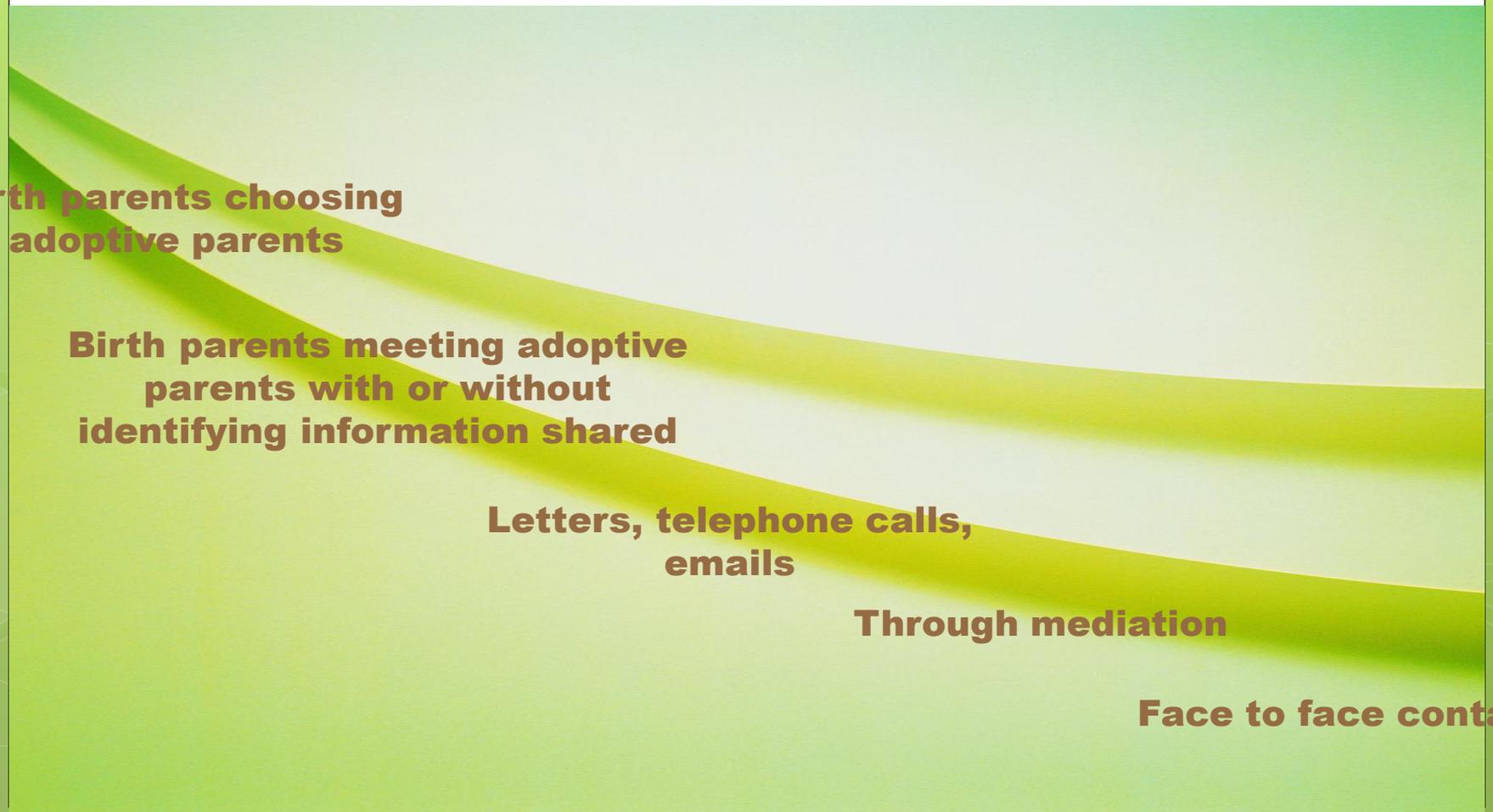
Facts about Open Adoption

- **Birth family is not forgotten by children**
- **Contact with birth family can dispel children's fantasies about placement reasons/history**
- **Birth parents do/can resolve some of their serious challenges and go onto healthier, more stable lives**
- **Adoptive parents do/can develop connections with birth families that are not detrimental to anyone**



Openness is defined as purposeful contact or communication between birth families, adoptive parents and adopted children

Openness Continuum



Open Adoption

- **Child focused**
- **Inclusive and respectful**
- **Unfolds over time**
- **Trusting**
- **Structured and communication based**



Why Choose Open Adoption?

- **Important to acknowledge the child's beginning and past**
- **"Honesty is the best policy"**
- **Increases self-esteem**
- **Allows for new or fresh information to be introduced into the child's understanding of themselves at appropriate developmental stages**
- **Allows for sibling connections**
- **Allows for on-going medical and familial information**
- **Identity issues in adolescence**

Why Choose Open Adoption?

- **Helps in accepting reality**
- **Diminishes anxiety and provides the child an openness in communication with their birth parents**
- **Supports and deepens family attachments**
- **Assures that all adults support the child through the unique challenges that adoption can create**



What Open Adoption Is Not

- **Static**
- **(Not) shared parenthood**
- **(Not) like open marriage or an open book**
- **(Not) like having an open house**
- **(Not) an answer to all adoption losses**
- **(Not) necessarily easy for adoptive family or birth family**



Open Adoption vs Closed Adoption

Brief History

Permanently severing the relationship between a child and his biological parents was first enacted into law in Massachusetts in 1851

In 1917, Minnesota passed the first state law barring public inspection of adoption records. Over the next decades records closed in almost all states

A “Shame Culture” regarding unplanned pregnancy, infertility and being adopted fueled these laws

In the 1960’s adoption moved toward openness which empowered adoptees and birth families to speak up about the “need to know”. Many adoptive parents joined this movement on behalf of their children.

Brief History

Society at that time also moved toward a culture of less secrecy and greater disclosure. The mental health professionals focused on the long term effects secrets had on clients.

In January 2010 some states reopened some or all of the records related to individuals adoption.

This change has created some controversy both with the internet, technology and advanced communications, individuals have opened adoptions in other ways.



Quick Research Review

Kohler, Grotevant, and McRoy (2002) found that adolescent adoptees, who perceived greater communication openness in their family, reported more trust of their parents, less alienation from them and better overall family functioning.

Open adoptions required a greater level of openness in communication about adoption issues than more traditional, closed adoptions.

Quick Research Review

Siegel (1993) found that although potential adoptive parents tended to be fearful about open adoption, once they had experienced it, they generally became positive about the practice of openness.

Research validates open adoption. The data gathered, to date, supports the idea that adopted individuals who experience more open, direct, and non-defensive communication about adoption with their parents show a more positive adjustment, not just in childhood but throughout their lives.





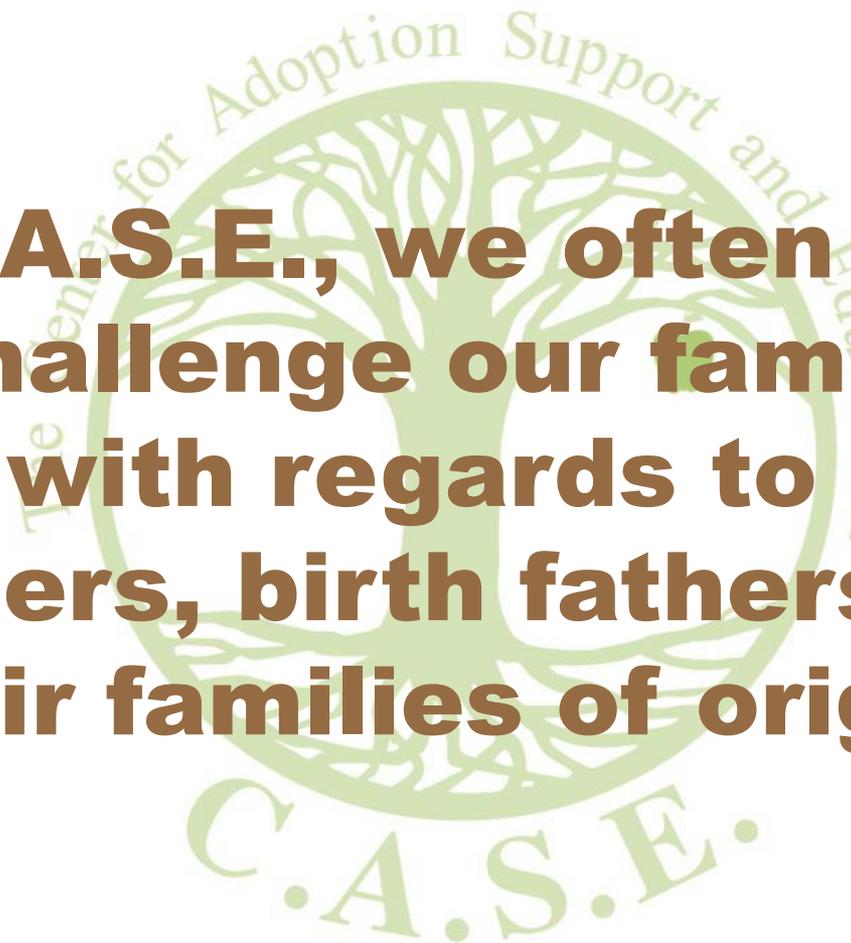
Hurdles for ADULTS in Open Adoption

- **Boundaries – lack of trust based on past experiences**
- **Grief and loss issues**
- **Ambivalence and feeling threatened**
- **Differing life experiences**
- **Community and extended family pressure**
- **Complexity of multiple open adoptions**

Hurdles for CHILDREN in Open Adoption

- **Clarification of roles**
- **Sharing with others – adults/peers**
- **Complexity of sibling connections**
- **Potential for change of roles over time**
- **Our own biases**





At C.A.S.E., we often have to challenge our families' bias with regards to birth mothers, birth fathers and their families of origin.

Adoption and Culture

General belief in the public is that the birth family culture is automatically different than the adoptive family culture. This bias may have developed because it feels more comfortable to support one family not parenting its offspring and another family taking on that role.

Adoption and Culture

Many families who find themselves confronting unplanned pregnancies and choosing adoption may have a culture similar to the family with whom they are placing.



When the culture of birth families and adoptive families are dissimilar

- **Bridging the gap**
- **Integrating**



Open Adoption in Action

Example

Jake is 7 and has lived with his adopted family since he came into care at 2 years old. Jake has had continuing visits with his maternal birth grandparents 4x a year over the last five years.

Recently Jake's adoptive family has decided to become vegetarians for health reasons. After a recent visit, an anxious Jake reports that his grandmother said that she believed a boy needed to eat meat to keep growing.



Guiding Principles for Open Adoption

- **Everyone has their own style of communicating with family members**
- **It is important to understand how everyone deals with obligations, rights and boundaries in their family**
- **When birth families and adoptive families come together, they apply the rules that that they would typically use in other relationships**

Guiding Principles

- **No two adoptions are the same**
- **Roles will change over time**
- **Open adoption at its core is about developing meaningful relationships**
- **Open adoption requires addressing the “hard stuff”**



Vignette

Caroline, 8 years old, has had visits with her birth mom, Lauren, on a monthly basis. Caroline was placed at birth in her adoptive home through private adoption. Recently Caroline has been diagnosed with learning and attention issues. Lauren has cancelled her last two visits with no explanation.



Why a Birth Parent Might Think about Closing an Open Adoption

- **Grief/shame**
- **Present life circumstances**
- **New spouse or partner**
- **Mental health needs**
- **Jealousy of other children**
- **Angry with adoptive family because of choices made for the birth child**

Why an Adoptive Family Might Think about Closing an Open Adoption

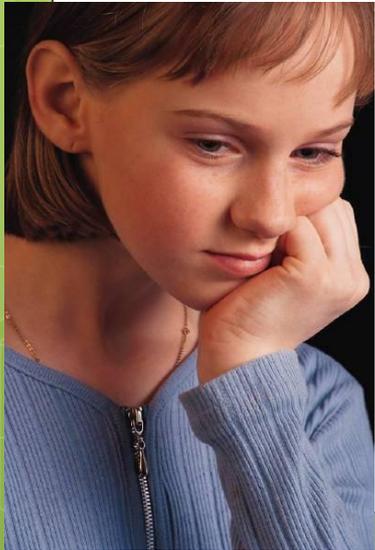
- **Concern about child's safety and emotional well-being**
- **Birth family is undermining the relationship between child and adoptive family**
- **Threatened by birth family's relationship with child**



When thinking about closing an open adoption...

- **Things change. One has to consider whether the family will be closing the adoption forever or until things change again.**
- **Knowing is better than not knowing. It is less stressful to know what is happening in the birth family system – are they healthy? Is she stable?**
- **Are there other relatives or kin that can maintain the relationship or does the adoption need to be closed?**

When parents understand that belonging to one's adoptive family and the right to one's birth connections are not mutually exclusive, they can assist their children with difficult loyalty issues that many adopted children, even adults struggle with.



Adopted children have birth families and regardless of the degree of contact or knowledge they have about them, those families have great meaning to your children.



Thank You!

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- ***Talking with Children about Adoption***
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- ***Open Adoption:
What it is and What it isn't? The how and why of making it work.***
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