Taking the Fear out of Open Adoption

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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:

- Pre- and post-adoption counseling, assessment and therapeutic services
- Individual and group therapy for kids, teens and adults
- Crisis intervention, support and assistance with school issues
- Training, education & interactive workshops – for families, educators and professionals
- Nationally recognized post-adoption models
- Award-winning print publications, articles, newsletters and online resources
- New Game: “52 Ways to Talk about Adoption”

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Objectives

to understand...

- the importance of birth parents in the lives of adopted children
- what open adoption is and isn’t
- open adoption in private and public placements (voluntary and involuntary)
- current adoption trends and research in support of post-placement contact
- fears and concerns of adoption circle members
- ingredients for successful relationships
For those of us who are adoptive parents, the most important thing about adoption is that it creates our families. Adoption brings us children who become ours forever. We form close bonds, love each other, grow together, and pass through normal crises just as families do who are brought together by birth.
The *second* most important thing about adoption is that our children have birth parents and, regardless of the degree of contact or knowledge we have about them, those birth parents have great meaning for our children.
What kids tell us

We know from our work that adopted children think about their birth parents more than their parents are aware of...
Ambiguous Loss

Always the possibility of being reunited makes “not knowing” emotionally challenging.

Pauline Boss
Results: “LIFELINES” PROJECT

- 91.6% of children reported feeling their birthmothers’ psychological presence within the past year
- 66% reported feeling their birthfathers’ psychological presence
- Strength of feelings ranged but were positively skewed
Implications

Birthparents remain very psychologically present to children, even in instances where the children have been removed from their parents’ care due to allegations of abuse or neglect.
Adoptive Parent Thoughts And Fears

• that the child will love the birth parent more than the adoptive parent – LOYALTY

• that the connection to birth parents will undermine the sense of belonging in the adoptive family

• that the child will be hurt, sad, confused, disappointed or afraid if we talk about birth family (let alone have contact with birth family)

• Birthparents will move on and not think about their birth child/ believe that the child will live “happily ever after”
Birth mother. Birth father. The words alone have tremendous power. They can mean connections and support, distance and questions, sadness or great joy.

As children grow up, parents need to come to terms with their feelings about their children’s birth parents in order to help their children identify, understand, and cope with their feelings about birth parents.
• This is critically important because the reality is that one of our most important tasks as adoptive parents is to help children and teens incorporate their birth parents into who they are, who they will become.
• Parents do this in the ways they communicate with their children about adoption.
Birth Parent Fears

- Adoptive parents don’t want birth parents in their lives and think “Birthparents had their chance and after placement/TPR, contact is finished”

- Contact may be too painful and create emotional distress for themselves and the children

- Children will hate them for not raising them

- They have no right to relationship with child

- Children will move on and not think about their birth family

- A very tiny minority fear being contacted by adoptee
Open Adoption vs Closed Adoption
Openness is defined as purposeful contact or communication between birth families, adoptive parents and adopted children.
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. Mental health professionals focused on the long term effects of secrets.

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

Social media and advances in technology have had a huge impact.
Brief History

- 20 years ago, 1 percent of domestic adoptions were open. Today, 60-70% of domestic adoptions are open.
- Trend began with private (agency and independent) adoptions but has moved into foster care adoption
- Increasing numbers of families have contact with birth family even in international adoptions.
- Jurisdictions vary with regard to enforcing open adoption agreements
- States are passing legislation giving adopted adults access to their original birth certificates.
Openness Continuum in Private Agency/Independent Adoptions

Birth parents choosing adoptive parents

Birth parents meeting adoptive parents with or without identifying information shared

Letters, telephone calls, emails, pictures, websites, SKYPE

Through mediated contact

Face to face contact

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Openness continuum in adoption through foster care

- Together with the courts, child welfare agency makes the permanency plan for adoption.
- Birth parents can choose to voluntarily relinquish parental rights (TPR) and discuss open adoption agreement.
- Mediators may be involved to assist with the agreement.
- Depending on the state, the agreement may or may not be legally binding.
- Is an adjustment for birth family as contact is usually less than while child was in foster care.
What we know...

• Birth family is not forgotten by children
• Birth family can play important role
• Children growing up with contact don’t know it’s “strange.” At older ages, desire for contact varies but many want it
• Many birth parents do/can resolve some of their serious challenges and go onto healthier, more stable lives
• Many adoptive parents today want to stay connected to birth family
Open Adoption

- Child focused
- Unfolds over time
- Ongoing Development of Trust between all parties
- Negotiate terms of contact – who, what, when, where, etc.
Benefits of Open Adoption

• Acknowledges the child’s beginning and past – children know where they came from. Knowledge is power
• Increases self-esteem: contact with birth family can dispel children’s fantasies about placement reasons/history; mitigate feelings of loss, rejection and abandonment
• Allows for new 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
• Assists children/teens with identity development
Benefits

• Can diminish anxiety about birth parents’ well-being
• Supports and deepens adoptive family attachment/relationships
• When adult relationships are working well, assures that all parties support the child through the unique challenges that adoption can create
Open Adoption Is Not

• static
• shared parenthood/joint custody as in divorce
• without challenges for everybody
• an answer to all adoption losses
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.

Minnesota/Texas Adoption Research Project began in the 1980’s. Grotevant and McCoy published first findings of children up to age 12 in *Openness in Adoption: Exploring Family Connections* 1998
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. (Minnesota/Texas Adoption Research Project)

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

Individuals who had contact were more satisfied with their arrangements than those who did not have contact. Satisfaction with contact predicted more optimal adjustment among adopted adolescents and emerging adults. Adoption-related communication predicted identity development among adopted adolescents and emerging adults. Birth mothers who were more satisfied with their contact arrangements, regardless of level of contact, had less unresolved grief 12 to 20 years after placement.

Contact Between Adoptive and Birth Families: Perspectives from the Minnesota Texas Adoption Research Project 9/2014
http://www.psych.umass.edu/adoPTION/key_findings/relationships_within_the_adoPTION_kINship_network/
Hurdles for Adoptive Parents in Open Adoption

- Boundaries – lack of trust, sometimes based on past experiences
- Loss and Grief issues
- Concerns regarding safety
- Ambivalence e.g. time, energy; is this really good for my child/family?
- Coping with child’s reactions to contact
- Feeling threatened/handling conflict/differences with respect
- Community and extended family attitudes/pressure
- Complexity of multiple open adoptions, or mix of closed/open
Hurdles for CHILDREN in Open Adoption

- Loss and grief
- Clarification of roles
- Sharing with others – adults/peers
- Complexity of sibling connections
- Potential for change of roles/contact over time
- Coping with relationship issues between adoptive parents’ and birth parents’
Hurdles for birth parents/family

- Loss and grief
- Clarification of roles
- Differing life experiences
- Maintaining respect when there is conflict
- Handling sibling and other family relationships with adopted child and adoptive family
- Birth family pressure
What happens when there are differences in religion, race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, geographical location, education, values, etc.? Differences in child rearing practices?
Open Adoption in Action

Example

Mary Jo was raised by a young birth mother and her extended family until she was two years old; she was placed in a foster home due to neglect and was adopted at 7 years of age. At age 10, she insisted that her adoption be opened, as she was wondering about her birth mother.
Tips for Successful relationships in Open Adoption

• Respect for individual styles 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 they would typically use in other relationships – they may require serious adjustments/adaptations!
Advice from the researchers

“Adoptive and birth relatives who engage in contact need flexibility, strong interpersonal skills, and commitment to the relationship. These skills can be learned, and they can be supported by others, through informal, psychoeducational, and therapeutic means.”

Contact Between Adoptive and Birth Families: Perspectives from the Minnesota Texas Adoption Research Project 9/2014
Open adoption in action

Two brothers – Juan and Luis, adopted at ages 4 and 6 have always been in an open adoption with their birth mother despite sexual abuse by birth mother’s former boyfriend. Married with another child, the birth mother and her husband have monthly visits with the boys who are now 10 and 12. Visits of course are supervised by the adoptive parents.
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”
- Requires commitment
Opening a closed adoption

- There is no one right time/age to do this – depends on each child/teen’s readiness and needs
- If children know that parents will support contact, less likely for children to do it behind parents’ back – e.g. FACEBOOK
- Preparation for all parties is key
- Other birth family members may substitute for an unavailable birth parent.
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/or 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...

- Get help! Adoption-competent therapists can provide assessment, consultations, individual and/or family therapy for relationship issues re: communication, problem-solving areas of conflict, etc.
- Leave door open -- circumstances change.
- Consider changing to different form of contact e.g. visits to emails, SKYPE.
- Are there other relatives or kin that can maintain the relationship?
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.
“The correct question is not, who does this child belong to but rather, who belongs to this child?”

Sharon Kaplan Roszia
Thank You!

Other In Demand webinars include:

• *Talking with Children about Adoption*
• *Beneath the Mask: Understanding Adopted Teens*
• *W.I.S.E. UP!℠ for Parents*
• *S.A.F.E. at School℠: Support for Adoptive Families for Educators*

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