

Birth Family Connections

Supporting Openness with Your Families



Voice of experience...

- *"I needed to know where I came from. I was tired of being different. I've been different all my life."*
Christine, 17
- *"I love them and I always wanted them to find me."*
Birth mother



It's Unavoidable!

In the age of social media, there is no such thing as a closed or completely confidential adoption. Parents and their supporters can choose to:

- Play a PROACTIVE role in any contact with the birth family
- Play a PASSIVE role in your child's contact with their birth family
- Play a HARMFUL role in your child's contact with their birth family

"It is not a matter of if, but when"



Goals of Open Adoption

- To minimize the child's loss of relationships
 - To allow children to resolve losses with truth, rather than with fantasy
- To maintain and celebrate the adopted child's connections with all the important people in his or her life



Dispelling the Myths of Open Adoption

- Open adoption does NOT interfere with adoptive parents entitlement to parent their child, nor does it diminish their sense of control
- Parents are NOT confused about their parenting rights and responsibilities, and...
- Children are NOT confused about who their parents are
- Birth parents do NOT attempt to "take back" children



Dispelling the Myths of Open Adoption, cont.

- Birth mothers in open adoptions do NOT have increased difficulty in resolving grief, they are faring better than those in closed adoptions
- Openness does NOT affect the child's self-esteem in any negative way
- Adolescents in open adoption are NOT more preoccupied with adoption *per se*
- Openness does NOT appear to directly affect adolescents' sense of identity



Factors in Increased Openness

- The birth and adoptive parents' mutual concern for the child's well being
- An emergence of friendship or a personally satisfying relationship between the birth and adoptive parents
- Regular flow of communication between the birth and adoptive families



Factors in Decreased Openness

- Geographic distance between families
- Major differences in values, life circumstances, etc.
- Relatives or friends who discourage contact
- Inability to mutually negotiate contact
- Agency inability to support ongoing contact
- Adoptive parents concerns for child
- Change in birth family



Developmental Issues as Relates to Openness

- Infant: No adoption awareness
- Age 1-5: Aware of differing appearance, asks simple questions about physical differences, ready to learn and re-tell his personal adoption story
- Age 6-12: Thinking about *meaning*: to be adopted means one was first given away, sense of loss; grieving for birth parents, may romanticize his birth parents, discomfort with being "different"; asks more difficult questions: Why am I adopted? Where are my birth parents?



The Center for Support and Education (C.A.S.E.)
<http://www.adoptionssupport.org/res/timeline.php>

Developmental Issues, cont.

- Age 13-15: Understands the implications of being adopted; acknowledges two sets of parents, ambivalence towards both; grief related to loss of birth parents; asks "why am I adopted?" - seeking depth in answers; emotional search for birth parents; self-esteem challenged re: concept of early abandonment; integrate adoption into one's sense of self



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Developmental Issues, cont.

- Age 16-19: Yearn for connection to genetic past; loss of birth parents extends to loss of a part of one's self; may try on traits of birth parents; awareness of not fitting in physically with family; identity formation: challenge "who am I?" - must figure out who they are in relation to adoption; differentiation can be complicated by one set of parents being unknown; new curiosity about origins; consider searching for birth parents



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Why Do Children Want Contact?

- NATURAL CURIOSITY
- Identity development –
 - Who am I?
 - Who/where/what do I come from?
 - Why am I this way?
 - Who could I have been?
 - Am I of value?
 - Am I to repeat parental patterns?
- Medical information



Why Would Children Hide Contact?

- Fear of:
 - Hurting, disappointing, or "betraying" adoptive parents
 - Being judged
 - Contact being cut off
 - Adoptive parent expectations/pressure

- Distrust in the long-term possibilities of the relationship



What Parents Need to Ask Themselves

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| <div style="border: 1px solid black; width: 100%; height: 20px; margin-bottom: 5px;"></div> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ How do I feel about my child's adoption story? What messages have I sent to my child regarding my feelings? ▪ What biases do I hold about my child's birth family? Where did these biases come from & why do they matter now? | <div style="border: 1px solid black; width: 100%; height: 20px; margin-bottom: 5px;"></div> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ What has my child expressed curiosity about regarding their birth family & history? ▪ How can I provide them with the information they are seeking? ▪ How secure do I feel in my relationship with my child & in my role as a parent? |
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What Parents Need to Ask Themselves

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- How could my decision about contact impact my relationship with my child?
 - Is it physically or emotionally unsafe for my child to be in touch with their birth family?
 - How does my child act/react before, during & after contact with their birth family?
 - Do we have a professional support system in place to manage the emotions that may arise with contact?



Questions Parents Should Ask Children



- Who do you want to contact?
- What are you hoping for when you contact your birth family?
- What worries you about contacting your birth family?
- How would you like to contact your birth family?
- What are the rules we should put in place when you are in contact with your birth family to make sure that everyone feels safe & comfortable?
- What is it like for you when you are in contact your birth family? What is it like for you before & after contact with them?
- How will you know if you need more, less, or a different type of contact with your birth family? How will you let me know what you need?
- How would you like me to be involved in your birth family contact?



A Gradual Process



- Begin with slow contact that allows for supervision & does not require immediate interactions, such as postcards, letters, and pictures by mail, emails, text messages, or social media exchanges.
- Once trust & safety are securely developed, contact involving immediate interactions can be allowed, such as phone calls, video chats & in-person visits.



The Process



- Discuss expectations early, including who will be in contact, when & how, frequency/duration, amount of information to be shared, how sensitive information will be handled, etc.
- Consider privacy options, such as setting up a separate email account or social media page, purchasing a prepaid phone or second phone number, using a P.O. Box, only meeting in public places, etc.



The Process

- If safety is a concern and contact is not a current option, be honest with your child about the reasons in a developmentally appropriate way, empathize with their wishes and fantasize with them, identify your role in keeping them safe, and provide matter-of-fact boundaries.





Prepare Yourself and Your Child

- Emotions that may arise – how to recognize and express them
- Wishes/hopes
- Worries/fears
- Setting realistic expectations
- How to handle confusion/disappointment
- Background on birth family members' appearances, physical disabilities, mental health issues
- Health symptoms, living environments, etc.
- *If you are not confident in your ability to adequately prepare your child for birth family contact, seek support from an adoption-competent therapist.*

PREPARE



Child's Rights

- Child has the right to decide if and when they want to begin contact.
- Child has the right to end or take a break from contact at any time and for any reason.
- Child has the right to ask their birth family any questions directly related to their history and identity.





Openness for Foster Kids

- Children in care whose goal is adoption are likely to achieve better outcomes by maintaining their existing connections with extended birth family members, siblings, and other attachment figures
- Decrease in adolescent resistance to adoption
- Decrease in adolescent loyalty issues
- With fost/adopt, there is usually an existing relationship between the families which naturally continues



Potential Benefits of Shared Parenting

Creating supportive relationships with birth parents may:

- Enhance child development, learning, and well-being by encouraging the child to return to the child role;
- Decrease children's defiant behavior by reducing their desire/need to demonstrate loyalty to birth family;
- Provide information and insights that enable foster parents to meet children's needs earlier and in a more effective way, thus helping children and reducing foster parent frustration;
- Reduce conflict with birth parents over various issues;
- Increase birth parent support for foster parents by reassuring them their children are being well cared for and that foster parents do not seek to replace them; and
- Create a positive connection between the foster parents, the child, and the child's family that will not have to end, even if the placement does.



Issues for consideration...



- Support staff play a critical role in open adoptions
- Adoption must be viewed as an ongoing process and not a discrete event
- A variety of options must be available and considered
- Attitudes and assumptions about birth families must be honestly explored
- Adult and child satisfaction with openness is related to their "buy-in" from the start



One Undisputed Fact

There is no one level of adoption openness that best fits all families. Each type of adoption has its own benefits and challenges that should be considered for each particular situation.



Four children, four experiences



Additional Resources

- Helping Children Connect with their Birth Parents
 - <https://www.nacac.org/resource/helping-children-connect-with-birth-parents/>
- Co-Parenting or Shared Parenting
 - <https://www.nacac.org/resource/co-parenting-or-shared-parenting/>
- Building Bridges Between Birth Parents, Foster Parents
 - <https://chronicleofsocialchange.org/featured/building-bridges-birth-parents-fostering-parents>
- Facilitated Openness Can Benefit Children Adopted from Care
 - <https://www.nacac.org/resource/facilitated-openness-can-benefit-children-adopted-from-care/>
- Ambiguous Loss Haunts Foster and Adopted Children
 - <https://www.nacac.org/resource/ambiguous-loss-foster-and-adopted-children/>


