

EVOLVING RELATIONSHIPS

by Ellen Singer, LCSW-C

It's not as simple as "open" or "closed." Most adoptive parents come to realize that time can change one's perspective on what is truly the best amount of contact for a family, regardless of decision which were made at the time their children first joined them. Although traditional, closed adoption (no contact between birth and adoptive families) is still practiced today, many are finding that opportunities to alter that arrangement become available over time.

In both domestic and international adoption, members of the adoption circle (birth parents, adoptive parents and adoptees) are finding ways to initiate or adjust contact to suite the unique needs of their families. There may be correspondence, telephone or in-person contact between adoptive and birth families. Relationships may develop between extended family members in the birth family or with foster parents who cared for children when they were young.

The kinds of decisions adoptive parents make with regard to post-placement contact depend on many important factors, including their level of comfort, beliefs about what is in the best interest of their children and concern for birth parent needs. Some find they can establish comfortable boundaries and limits, important in navigating all relation-ships.

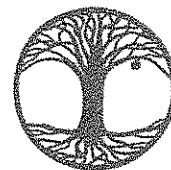
It is not at all unusual for adoptive parents to initially reject the idea of contact with their child's birth parents. The concept of open adoption often seems invasive and frightening. Parents may need time to feel close to their child, to strengthen the process of entitlement, which means claiming the child as their own. However, as parents learn more about the normal kinds of thoughts and feelings that adopted children experience as they grow, their concerns usually shift to the needs of their child.

For example, when parents learn how normal it is for adopted children during middle childhood to wonder and be sad about the loss of their birth family, they may want to find ways to give their children the opportunity for contact, if it is possible. Of course, contact is not necessarily the only appropriate avenue to help children cope with these normal feelings. However, parents need to know that it ought to be considered.

Consequently, when given the opportunity to continue or begin some form of post-placement contact with a child's birth family, many parents consider themselves lucky to be able to have such access. Whether it is in the form of an exchange of letters, pictures, phone calls, visits or even the decision to visit the child's birth country, many are surprised to find themselves adjusting their beliefs about openness in adoption because they believe it will benefit their child.

The Value of Openness

Adoption is considered to be an "ambiguous loss" for all adopted children. It is a loss without closure. When birth parents are viewed as missing or absent, adoption creates an "unclear good-bye that falls outside the category of loss but, nonetheless, causes distress," according to Pauline Boss, author of *Ambiguous Loss* (1999). When adoptees feel this way, some form of contact can help to lessen their sadness, as well as their common feelings of rejection and abandonment. It can provide an answer to the pervasive question of young adoptees: "Does she still think of me?" Patricia Dorner writes in *Children of Open Adoption*, (1990), "Children in open adoption [can] have a greater sense of well-being knowing they are actively loved and remembered." Many parents find that relationships with birth families eliminate the frustration that can result from a lack of birth parent history and questions with no answer. For example, "What will I look like when I grow up?"



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ANSWERS FOR ADOPTIVE PARENTS

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In situations where aspects about birth parent information is considered difficult for children or teens to handle, many adoption professional believe that continued contact is still beneficial for the adopted child. Joyce Pavao, author of *The Family of Adoption* (1998) describes a situation where a nine-year-old girl's birth mother suffered from schizophrenia and visits took place in a supervised setting in a therapist's office. While children and teens often struggle with "Why couldn't she keep me?" contact with her birthmother enabled the girl to clearly understand the need for an adoptive family. Dr. Pavao and other experts also agree that children fare better coping with difficult realities than with fantasy. In fact, Harold Grotevant and Ruth McRoy, researchers in open adoption (*Openness in Adoption: Exploring Family Connections*, 1998), found that "children in more open relationships seem to be less preoccupied with their status as an adopted person, spending less time thinking or fantasizing about their birth parents than children involved in confidential adoptions."

Relationships between adoptive and birth families are not static and may certainly change over time, from periods of more contact to less, and back again. Many parents involve their children in the contact from the very beginning, sharing presents or pictures, reading letters sent by the birth parents and involve the children later on.

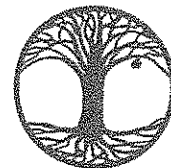
Parents with traditionally closed adoptions may be thinking about having contact with birth families much sooner than they initially thought they would. As noted, sometimes it is because they have begun to learn about the benefits of contact at the same time that their child has expressed an interest. However, it may also be because the birth parents have come forward, usually via an intermediary of the placement agency or attorney. Visits to the children's land of birth also make the contact seem more possible and desirable.

What's Right for Your Family?

Adoption is not a one-size-fits-all phenomenon. What is right for one child and one family may not be right for another. Children's interests, readiness and preparation for contact are of paramount importance. The age of the child is less important than particular needs at different points in time. As Sharon Kaplan Roszía and Lois Melina wrote in *The Open Adoption Experience* (1993), "If the child is old enough to express an opinion, respect that opinion. If he is not ready to proceed with direct contact, spend some time exploring what his fears and anxieties might be, allowing his relationship with the birth parents to develop at his pace."

If you are considering whether or how to open contact with your child's birth parents, The Center for Adoption Support and Education recommends you consider the following:

- 1. How has your family handled communication about adoption and your child's adoption story up to this point?** Before opening your child's adoption in any way, first examine your own feelings about being adoptive parents — including your attitudes toward birth parents. If you have not worked out issues related to infertility or Entitlement (your certainty that your child belongs to you and that you have the right to raise him), you are unlikely to give your child permission to have positive, loving feelings towards his or her birth parents. Are you secure enough about your child's attachment to you to be comfortable allowing him to have feelings and a relationship with his birth parents? Will you feel threatened? Self-exploration and self-awareness can prevent conscious or unconscious sabotaging of the new relationship
- 2. Whose needs will be served by opening up contact at this time?** While it is very important to respect birth parent wishes, decision regarding contact must be made while considering the benefits to the child. Consider carefully whether your own needs might be propelling you forward. Some children do not appear to be struggling with adoption issues, or asking questions, or directly asking for contact. In those cases, should you leave well enough alone? Or should you act on your belief that, some day, contact will matter and may become more difficult to introduce, especially during adolescence? Do you know that your child has some fears, but will probably welcome contact in the long run?



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3. What are your children expecting and hoping to find? The old saying, “be careful what you wish for, because you might get it” can be true for children who express interest in contact. It is important to help children explore their feelings about contact, their fantasies about the birth parents, and relationships with them. It is your responsibility to make certain that your children are as prepared as possible for the difficult, complex emotions they may experience. In addition to excitement and anticipation, there may be fear and ambivalence. They may worry about what will happen to their relationship with you, or that their birth parents will not like them and will “reject” them again. Children also need to be prepared for the possibility that their birth parents will reject the request for contact. It is not uncommon for children to have difficulty sharing their feelings about birth parents and it may be most beneficial to give your child the opportunity to talk with an adoption counselor before making any attempt to initiate or change the level of contact with birth parents.

4. What is my child’s emotional maturity and what other important issues is she struggling with? Because increased contact is likely to have a profound impact on children and teens, parents need to consider the challenges and strengths of their children. Are they struggling at school? In their peer relationships? Are there serious ups and downs in the family? Adoption professionals can help you assess how changes generated by increased contact are likely to be tolerated by both your child and your family.

5. What kind of initial and long-term contact can you and your child handle? Contact often begins by getting to know each other without physical contact. It can be a more comfortable way of beginning for you and your child. This also allows time for children to explore feelings evoked by initial contact. For example, he may learn something disappointing about his birth parents, or something that does not fit in his fantasy. Holding off face-to-face contact allows time to gradually come to terms with situations. Gradual contact allows for the beginning of trust which is so important in all significant relationships.

6. How will other family members be impacted by contact with your child’s birth family? Such new relationships will affect everyone important to your circle of family and friends. Grandparents, aunts, uncles and close friends may question your choices. They are likely to be unsure about how to relate to individuals who do not feel like family to them. It will be important to your child that they are welcoming. What can you do to help prepare them?

Families should consider meeting an adoption therapist to explore answers to these and other questions.

RESOURCES

[The Open Adoption Experience](#) by Lois Melina and Sharon Kaplan Roszia

[Making Room in Our Hearts](#) by Micky Duxbury

[The Family of Adoption](#) by Joyce Pavao

[Children of Open Adoption](#) by Kathleen Silber and Patricia Martinez Dorner

[Dear Birthmother](#) by Kathleen Silber and Phyllis Speedlin

[Tell Me a Real Adoption Story](#) by Betty Jean Lifton *(for children)*

The Myths About Open Adoption

Adoptive parents and birth parents in open adoptions are constantly confused about their parental rights. It's difficult to tell where one parent stops and the other begins.

- False. Adoptive parents and birth parents within open adoptions are usually fully aware of their responsibilities and rights. This is a relationship that is constantly evolving and needs lots of open communication to flourish.

Birth family members take the adoptive family back to court over and over in an attempt to get their children back. If this doesn't work, kidnapping is often an employed tactic.

- False. Birth mothers and fathers working within an open adoption do not attempt to regain custody of their children. Seriously, how often do you hear of kidnapped adopted children on the news?

Children in open adoptions are completely confused about who their parents really are. They do not understand the roles of their birth and adoptive parents.

- False. Children in open adoptions understand the parental roles of their birth and adoptive families. This is easier for the children when the adults in their lives are open and honest with them.

The adolescent's adoptive identity and degree of preoccupation with adoption are related to the level of openness in the adoption. The more open the adoption, the greater the lack of identity for the adopted teen.

- False. Research shows that an adopted teen's sense of identity and how preoccupied he is with adoption is not related to the level of openness in his adoption.

Open adoptions have a negative impact on an adopted child's self-esteem. The more open the adoption is, the worse the adopted child feels about herself.

- False. Openness in adoption does not seem to influence the adoptee's self-esteem negatively.

Adoptive parents in open adoption often feel out of control and lack a sense of attachment and relationship with their child.

- False. Adoptive parents in open adoption often feel that they have control and a GREATER sense of permanence in their relationship with their child.

Open adoptions interfere with an adoptive parent's sense of parental right to parent their child. They tend to feel more like glorified babysitters.

- False. Most adoptive parents within an open adoption relationship with the birth family do not feel that they have any less right to parent their child.

Birth mothers in open adoptions struggle with grief resolution. Spending time with their placed child is painful and recalls the past grief. Open adoptions delay healing.

- False. Birth mothers in open and ongoing mediated adoptions do NOT have more problems with grief resolution. In fact, research shows that they did better with grief resolution than those birth mothers in closed adoptions. However, research also shows that an abrupt stop in contact did cause birth mothers more difficulty in grief resolution.

Source:

[Child Welfare Information Gateway](#)