

## The Benefits of Open Adoption

Explaining the benefits that an open adoption has for all triad members is something that all of us touched by open adoption are often called to do. From the simple conversation in the grocery store that escalates to an involved discussion, to answering the questions of our family and friends, we are frequently put in a position of explaining our choices.

It is often hard to know what to say. Most people are under the impression that open adoption exists only to serve the interests of birthparents. When others learn of our open adoption situation most birthparents get the "that must be nice for you" response. On the other hand, most adoption parents hear, "You let *them* know where you live?!?"

While not all people *deserve* a thoughtful response, many people are truly interested and concerned. Instinctively we know that we are doing is what's best for the child. Our first step then, is to dispel the myth that open adoption exists as a privilege given to birthparents.

True open adoption is child centered and based on the needs of the child. If you start by making this point, it will give those you are talking to an understanding as to why contact is important to you, even if it is sometimes uncomfortable or painful. It will also let them know that you feel contact is a commitment you have made for the well being of your child.

### **The Child**

The primary beneficiary in an open adoption is, of course, the child. In growing up in an open adoption they have a number of opportunities that their peers in closed placements do not have.

#### ***A sense of identity***

Our identities are a unique mix of nature and nurture. For the adoption child, the ability to know his genetic heritage is a benefit that few of us could imagine being without. When I look in the mirror I not only see myself, I see my father's hair, my grandmother's body type and my sister's eyes.

Other traits are less obvious. My sense of generosity comes from my mother, a woman who has talent for giving. My sense of independence and ambition undoubtedly comes from the fact that all the women in my family are education professionals. With role models like this, I grew up knowing that the possibilities were endless.

What does my son, Matthew, see when he looks in the mirror? Possibly, he sees a boy with his birthfather's chin, his birthmother's hair and his adoptive father's gregarious personality. Perhaps he sees a future of possibilities within himself, a reflection of all the lives that have touched his.

What is important is that he is growing up knowing all the pieces of the puzzle. With time, he will be able to put them all together to give him a complete picture of who he is.

#### ***A complete history***

Most adopted children have questions about why they were placed for adoption. They may also wonder what it was like for the birthmother when she was pregnant with them, as well as what their birth was like. For the child in an open adoption, the answers to these questions are as close as the phone. Our answers are an invaluable gift that we, as birthparents, can give our children. Even when the truth is difficult, it is easier for adopted children to live than the unknown.

Sharing the joyful moments of the pregnancy will also help children understand a connection that you share that can never be severed. It gives you an opportunity to focus on the good times, like feeling the first kick, hearing the heartbeat, and seeing their precious face for the first time.



### ***The knowledge that they are loved by their birthfamily***

While many adoptees in open adoptions may question the reasons behind their relinquishment, most are secure in the knowledge that they are loved by their birthfamily.

Our children have the opportunity to learn about our love for them with every birthday card we send, with every play we attend, with every story we read them. By being a part of their lives, by showing our love for them in small, but significant ways, they will grow up knowing how much we care.

### ***A ready source of medical information and support***

With the growing realization that many diseases are genetically determined, having access to current medical information can often be a matter of life and death. Most physicians will take a birthfamily's medical history into account when determining which tests should be a routine part of the yearly physical exam.

Also, should the unthinkable happen and the child gets an illness that can be treated with a bone marrow or kidney transplant, a birthfamily member may turn out to be the best possible donor.

Genetics also play a big role in physical development. Events like cutting the first tooth, walking, the onset of puberty, and other milestones are known to be hereditary. Knowing this information can be helpful in determining whether or not there is a problem with development.

## **The Birthparents**

Birthparents in open adoption face challenges that few birthparents in closed adoption could even dream about. Most of us would agree, however, that the benefits of openness far outweigh the new challenges created.

### ***Control in the placement process***

One of the hallmarks of open adoption is that it gives birthparents the ability to choose the adoptive parents of their child. For many birthparents this is a transforming experience. It is the process of going from a passive observer to an active participant.

It was not easy for me to come to the realization that I wanted more for my son than I was able to give. Choosing my son's adoptive parents gave me the opportunity to find parents for him that would raise him with values and beliefs similar to my own. It gave me the ability to provide for him in the best way I knew how.

Over the years I have had a lot of contact with birthparents in both closed and open adoptions. While all of us have experienced, losing a child to adoption, the way that loss is processed and resolved is very different.

Birthparents in closed adoptions were, and in many cases still are, told that they should forget their child and get on with their lives. Many were so effective in denying their loss that they still cannot remember parts of their pregnancy or their child's birth. Birthfathers' feelings were never considered at all.

For birthparents in open adoption, denying the impact of our loss is not realistic. With ongoing contact, our loss is always "in our face." We are forced to deal with it every time our child runs to their adoptive parents for reassurance or comfort. We are reminded of our new role every time our child calls for Mom or Dad and we are not the one they are calling for.

While this is initially very painful, it forces us to grieve in a healthy way. Unable to deny our grief, we can move through it to the other side.

### ***The potential of developing a special relationship with the child***

Part of successfully resolving our grief is feeling comfortable with our role as a birthparent. Having a special relationship with our child helps us get to the point where we can see that our role as their birthparent is precious to them.

People often ask me how Matthew views our relationship. Does he see me as an aunt or a special friend? My answer is that he sees me as his birthmother. It is a special relationship



without parallel. As his birthmother, I can tell him the story of his beginnings like no one else can. I can reinforce that my decisions were made with love and concern for him.

Having a relationship with our children will never take away our feelings of loss that we are not their parents. It can, however, give us an active, loving role in our children's lives that will help us resolve that loss.

#### ***Encourages them to confront the issue of shame***

Shame is perhaps the least talked about aspect of a birthparent's experience with adoption. We are constantly receiving the double messages that while our choice was selfless, how can any "real mother give her child away." Many of us have also lost friends as a result of our decision. Others still have family members who consider our unplanned pregnancy a "dirty little secret." As a result, many of us have doubted our worth.

Those that feel as though they have nothing to offer will often back away. We are compelled then, to confront the issue of shame if our relationships are to thrive. Luckily, for the majority of birthparent in open adoptions, it quickly becomes clear that the message of shame just does not fit. The image of "a dirty little secret" is replaced by the reality of a beautiful, innocent child.

The more we come to love our children and their adoptive families, the less room we have in our hearts for anything that takes away from that. Shame gets driven out by our need to reaffirm our children and the relationship with their adoptive families. Our feelings of self worth are then based on our part of the miracle of our children, instead of the opinions of others.

### **Other Birthfamily Members**

There is no doubt that placing our child for adoption effects our family members. They are also confronted with loss, the loss of a niece or nephew or the loss of a grandchild. They also have to let go of the aunt or grandparent they would have been had their son or daughter raised the child, and redefine their role in the adoptive family.

Luckily, more and more birthparents and adoptive parents are realizing that other birthfamily members are important to the adopted child and can have a positive place in their life. By including concerned and loving birthfamily members in the "open adoption family," birthfamilies are able to grieve the loss and move on. They are also able to confront their own issues of shame.

Another benefit is that the adopted child and birthsiblings have the opportunity to know each other as they grow. Many in open adoptions are finding that these relationships are often as important as those between the birthparents and the adopted child.

### **The Adoptive Parents**

While the general public may believe that birthfamily involvement is a burden to adoptive parents, most adoptive parents will tell you that they have benefited from open adoption as well.

#### ***Ability to answer their child's questions***

Finding answers to a child's questions is the number one task of parenthood. For adoptive parents, being able to find answers to their children's questions surrounding adoption, is made infinitely easier by being involved with the birthfamily. Have this source of information enables adoptive parents to answer their children's questions truthfully.

#### ***Lessens fear***

Open adoption allows birthparents and adoptive parents to get to know each other. Because of this, most come to realize that they are friends instead of adversaries. Their shared love of a child has the power to bring them together instead of pull them apart. Knowing the truth about each other also allows adoptive parents to accept their children's birthparents for who they are instead of seeing them as a vague threat to their family's happiness. Because of



this, adoptive parents in open adoptions do not fear their children's birthparents the way some adoptive parents in closed adoptions do.

#### **A sense of entitlement**

Genetics undoubtedly play a part in shaping us. Besides our physical characteristics, may believe that our talents, temperament and interests are genetically influenced. Personality type has also been linked to a person's genetic make-up. When adoptive parents know their children's birthfamilies they are better able to see the direct influence they are having on their children's lives. Matt's mom, Cathy, has always encouraged him to try new things. As a result he is developing interests and talents that neither his birthfather nor I share.

#### **Conclusion**

Open adoption, above all, acknowledges the child as a total human being, shaped by many influences. It provides an opportunity for the adopted child to grow up feeling whole and loved by all the important people in their life.

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