

Open Adoption, How Open?

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Open adoption is a growing trend and can have many benefits. Still most families will benefit by looking into it more deeply before they leap.

Most adoptions are semi-open in that adoptive and birth parents may have contact before, during and after the adoption. This has been shown to be in the best interests of all adoption triad members: children, adoptive and birth parents. Communication between adoptive and birth parents offers the chance to share information and allay fears for both sets of parents, and has been reported to help birth parents grieve the loss of their baby and gives adoptive parents much more real information to share with their child. In a semi-open adoption there is often the opportunity to open the adoption further if that is desired in the future.

An **Open Adoption** involves the child meeting and knowing the birth parents, often over time. Currently there is a movement toward open adoption but as of yet no significant longitudinal research on the psychological outcomes for children. Family systems theory views secrecy and distrust as antithetical to healthy families and advocates of open adoption are using these family therapy concepts to support their recommendation for open adoptions. While there is a general truth to these values, developmental psychology recommends sharing complex information with children in bits and pieces at age appropriate times. For a particular family the appropriate time to open an adoption may be based on the information that will be brought to light by having the child communicate directly with the birth parents, the particular child's psychological make up and the parents, both adoptive and birth, as well as some other factors.

Given the complexity of open adoption, the IAC Center is not on board with a blanket approach to opening adoptions. Our recommendation is *to always make timely decisions that are mindful of long term considerations*. You will want to go slowly in making open adoption plans so that you can be mindful of the unique personalities of all involved triad members: the child, the adoptive and the birth parents; and conscious of life cycle issues in opening adoptions. These considerations include but are not limited to the following issues:

1. People cannot usually make clear-headed long-term decisions in a crisis.
2. The emotions involved in wanting a baby can complicate adoptive parents' perspectives of long term issues for themselves and they cannot yet know how their particular child will feel about open adoption.
3. The emotions involved in placing a baby can complicate the birth parents' grasp of what open adoption really means. Open adoption is a responsibility and once a child is involved the birth parents would need to be committed to making decisions that are considerate of the child's feelings and needs. This would be difficult for birth parents to assess in many pre-adoptive situations, and adoptive parents will not know birth parents well enough to know how they will relate to a child they have placed over time.
4. During the adoption process when open adoption plans are being considered, the child's viewpoint is not usually available. Adoption is supposed to be in the best interests of the child. Children are individuals with unique

perspectives and families will have to wait until children are older to know how their child feels about open adoption.

5. Confident and centered parents are clearly in the best interests of the child and future family development. Adoptive parents may need a period, especially at the beginning, to connect to the reality of becoming their child's real parents.

Prior to the adoption, many prospective adoptive parents are in a state of disbelief or even denial that they will really become parents through adoption. They may not fully connect to the reality of becoming parents as their histories usually include loss and anxiety in relation to whether they will actually succeed in adopting. At the beginning these new parents may not know what kind of boundaries they will need to develop their full entitlement to parenting and to claiming their adopted child as their own. They will need time to emotionally connect to becoming parents and optimally this would be respected by birth parents and adoption professionals.

In this context, too open of an adoption at the beginning could be too much and these new parents benefit from help in setting boundaries as they make their own journey to becoming parents.

6. Adoption professionals have found that over time adoptive parents often wish to open adoptions more; and birth parents sometimes prefer to get on with their lives and withdraw from the adoptive family. These normal life cycle developments need to be respected.

IAC Center has worked with too many families in which birth parents withdrew after meeting the children to recommend open adoption as a blanket approach for all newly forming adoptive families. One issue for a child is to be placed for adoption, a completely different issue is to meet birth parents and then to have them withdraw. This could be internalized by a child as a double rejection.

Optimally, adoptive and birth parents would need to know each other well before an open adoption would be put into effect.

7. Psychological development of the adopted child would always involve the child developing some natural curiosity about their birth parents. Children will want to know who their birth parents are, whether they look like them or share their traits and why their birth parents placed them and if their birthparents still think about them. Children need to process their adoption losses in bits and pieces and come to terms with what their adoption means to them. This is a natural and evolving process in the development of the adopted child's self.

IAC Center's position is that when, as a result of this natural internal process, a child wants to meet their birth parents and the adoptive parents determine that their child is ready to meet their birth parents and the birth parents are willing, you have an adoption that is opening in the best interests of the child.

8. Some children will want to meet their birth parents as they process their feelings about adoption, others will not be ready emotionally and still others may not want to meet them. When a child wishes for birth parent contact the first step is to understand why and what the child needs and whether the child is ready for birth parent contact. Such a decision would always need to

be mindful of who the birth parents are at this point in time and whether they have boundaries that the adoptive parents are comfortable with.

Adoption Counselors can help all adoption triad members to understand their expectations of the meeting and the possible relationships going forward; and can help the family to decide when and how to open their adoption. This more measured and personalized approach will ultimately be in the best interests of all adoption triad members.

In addition, until further longitudinal research is presented, IAC Center's position is that in most situations an open adoption that is initiated by a child's normally developed wishes is in the best interest of the child.

9. You can always open an adoption more but once it is open it can be hurtful to close it even by a small amount.
10. If we reach a point where open adoption is required by adoption agencies or birth parents, adoptive parents' definition of a good adoption situation will have to be expanded to include a "good fit" for open adoption, including level of openness desired, agreement on boundaries and shared values and most important, primary respect for the child.

IAC Center recommends that pre-adoptive parents working with birth parents "under promise and over deliver" when it comes to open adoption. Open adoptions can be wonderful but can be more organically developed and families may need time and guidance in deciding what it is right for them before, during and after the actual adoption process.