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Openness in Adoption

From Secrecy and Stigma to Knowledge and Connections

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Practice Perspective

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The institution of adoption has made significant strides in the last several decades, but elements of its clandestine, stigmatized past remain – and, as a consequence, so do many myths, misconceptions and inaccurate stereotypes. One stark example is that even though openness in adoption is fast becoming the norm within the United States (especially in the placement of infants), the very notion of "open adoption" – which entails varying levels of ongoing connections between adoptive families and their children's families of origin – is unfamiliar, misunderstood and even incomprehensible to much of our culture.

That is primarily because, as a result of adoption's secretive history, there is relatively little common knowledge about the people involved or the nature of their relationships. And the repercussions of that lack of knowledge are considerable, from negative attitudes about birthparents to lack of accurate information for those considering adoption. Understanding openness is critically important to informed decision-making for expectant parents exploring whether to place their children into new families, as well as for adults seeking to become adoptive mothers or fathers. All those individuals, of course, are also affected by the attitudes and beliefs of their relatives, significant others and the general public.

Not long ago in historical terms, nearly everything relating to adoption was hidden, with some parents not even telling their own children that they were adopted. Honesty within and about adoptive families has grown enormously over the last several decades, even as the composition of those families has changed – and continues to change – significantly.

For generations until the second half of the 20th Century, nearly all formal adoptions in our country consisted of white, married, infertile couples adopting babies born to white, single women. Today, most adoptions in the U.S. are of older children, many of whom are of color, and a growing percentage of whom do not share their new parents' race, ethnicity or nationality. Likewise, the profile of the women and men who are adopting has changed dramatically; today, they are people who are fertile, of color, single, older, gay, lesbian, cohabitating, and from a wide range of incomes and educational backgrounds (Vandivere, Malm, & Radel, 2009). One common denominator remains among the adults involved, however: They typically start out with limited information about adoption's current realities – and what they do know is gleaned primarily from the media, whose own understanding of the process and of the millions of people it affects is often less than complete or accurate (Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute, 1997).

While openness has become common practice in domestic adoptions in this country (Vandivere, et al., 2009), it is an alien concept for many seeking to adopt, as well as for their friends, families and others with whom they interact in their professional and personal lives. In fact, the first national survey on public attitudes related to adoption, published by the Adoption Institute in 1997, found considerable ambivalence in the general public toward even a moderate level of

openness; only 16 percent of respondents, for example, approved of birthmothers[1] in most adoptions occasionally sending cards or letters to adoptive families, with others saying it was okay in some (40%) or very few (23%) cases. According to the adoption professionals who responded to a new survey – described in this report – understanding of the realities of openness in adoptions today is an area in which considerable progress is needed.

Since the practice of openness took hold in the U.S. in the 1980s and 1990s, adoption professionals, researchers and the affected parties themselves have identified many benefits for birth families, adopted children and adoptive parents. Some challenges have been documented as well, including ones stemming from early misunderstandings or conflicting expectations. It is critically important for adoption professionals, as well as members of birth and adoptive families, to understand openness and the factors that are important for shaping effective open adoption relationships, not only in making decisions related to openness before child placement, but also in navigating open relationships over time.

This report is the first in a series the Institute plans to publish that will address the phenomenon of openness in domestic infant adoptions. It summarizes research knowledge on the topic and presents findings from a survey of 100 infant adoption programs in the U.S. regarding their practices around openness and the qualities that facilitate successful open adoption relationships. The institute is also in the final stages of preparing a related curriculum for pre-adoptive parents and expectant parents considering adoptive placement for their children.

Primary Findings

Adoptions exist along a continuum, from completely closed (sometimes called "confidential"), meaning there is no contact between the birth and adoptive families and usually little if any knowledge by their members about each other; to completely open (sometimes called "fully disclosed"), in which there is ongoing contact among those involved, including the child. "Mediated" adoptions fall between these two poles – that is, the adoption agency facilitates the periodic exchange of pictures and letters, but there typically is no direct contact among the affected parties and they do not receive identifying information about each other. In historical terms, absolute secrecy in adoption is a relatively recent practice; it began in the U.S. in the 1930s and grew out of the prevailing attitudes of the day, primarily the desire to protect adopted children from the stigma of illegitimacy. As that stigma gradually evaporated over the ensuing decades, the number of agencies offering open adoptions grew rapidly and, by 1999, close to 80 percent offered that option (Henney, McRoy, Ayers-Lopez, & Grotevant, 2003).

Today, research attests to the reality that most private adoptions of infants in this country involve some level of openness, and a recent survey – viewed as the first nationally representative study of adoptive families in the U.S. – found there is continuing contact between

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[1] The terms "birthmother" or "birthparents" are used consistently throughout this paper due to the fact that this is the term used most often in adoption literature and research; however, it is important to note that many persons in this role prefer other language, such as "first mother."

adopted children and their birth relatives in about two-thirds of families adopting privately (Vandivere, Malm & Radel, 2009). The greater practice of openness came about largely in response to growing recognition of the negative impact of secrecy and to the demands of birthparents (mainly mothers). Adoption professionals were frequently consulted by adopted persons seeking to gain access to birth relatives, typically in order to find answers to burning questions, and by birthparents wanting to know what had become of the children they created. As openness became more commonly practiced, researchers studied this phenomenon and found that the vast majority of those maintaining open relationships value the benefits that such contact brings, particularly for adopted persons – as children and as they grow up.

The Adoption Institute's review of available research on openness, as well as its new survey of 100 adoption agencies with infant adoption programs, produced the following key findings:

- The number of "closed" infant adoptions in the U.S. has shrunk to a tiny minority. Indeed, respondents said confidential adoptions constituted only 5 percent of their placements during the past two years, while 55 percent were fully disclosed and 40 percent were mediated. Ninety-five percent of the agencies said they now offer open adoptions.

- In the vast majority of infant adoptions, the adoptive and expectant parents considering adoption meet each other, and the expectant parents pick the new family for their baby.

- There is definite fluidity in openness levels, particularly during the first few years of an adoption, with studies showing that contact is subsequently established in some arrangements that did not start off as open, while relationships are sometimes curtailed or ended even though the initial plan had been for ongoing contact (Grotevant & McRoy, 1998; Crea & Barth, 2009).

- Most participants in open adoptions report positive experiences, and greater openness is associated with greater satisfaction with the adoption process (Grotevant & McRoy, 1998; Grotevant, Perry, & McRoy, 2005; Ge, et al., 2008). Furthermore, birthmothers who have ongoing contact with their children report less grief, regret and worry, as well as more peace of mind, than do those who do not have contact (Cushman, Kalmuss & Namerow, 1997; Henney, Ayers-Lopez, McRoy & Grotevant, 2007).

- The primary benefit of openness is access by adopted persons – as children and continuing later in life – to birth relatives, as well as to their own medical, genealogical and family histories. Adolescents with ongoing contact are more satisfied with the level of openness in their own adoptions than are those without such contact, and they identify the following benefits: coming to terms with the reasons for their adoption, physical touchstones to identify where personal traits came from, information that aids in identity formation, positive feelings toward birthmother, and others. Youth in open adoptions also have a better understanding of the meaning of adoption and more active communication about adoption with their adoptive parents (Berge, et al., 2006; Grotevant, et al., 2007; Wrobel, et al., 1996 & 1998).

- Adoptive parents as a group report positive experiences with open adoptions and high levels of comfort with contact. For them, greater openness is linked with reduced fear of and greater empathy toward birthparents, more open communication with their children about adoption, and other benefits in their relationships with their adopted children (Berry, et al., 1998; Grotevant & McRoy, 1998; Grotevant, Perry, & McRoy, 2005; Grotevant, et al., 1994; Siegel, 2008).

The Institute's survey of adoption agencies identified the following factors as important to achieving successful open adoption relationships:

1. **Shared understanding by birth and adoptive parents about what open adoption is and is not** (based on an ethical foundation of decision-making, a child-centered focus, clear expectations of respective roles, and an understanding of open adoption's benefits, challenges and complexities (for instance, that it does not erase loss).

2. **Foundational relationship qualities and values** (empathy, respect, honesty, trust and a commitment to maintaining the connection) are ideals for the parties in open relationships.

3. **Ability of all parties to exercise self-determination in choosing and shaping open relationships** (exercising self-determination in the original agreement, in setting boundaries, and adaptability as the relationship changes over time).

4. **Development by all parties of "collaborative" communication in planning for contact and in conveying needs** (comfort and honesty in communicating, planning for contact and availability of post-adoption services).

Recommendations

The professionals surveyed and interviewed for the Institute's study, which is the basis of this report, overwhelmingly indicated that most parents who come to them – those considering placing their babies for adoption and those who want to adopt – have many fears, concerns and misconceptions about openness and need considerable education, support and assistance in understanding their options and in developing arrangements that work best for them. They also described an array of barriers and challenges that parents can face as they seek to develop open adoption relationships. Our recommendations for addressing these needs include:

- **All parents involved (expectant ones considering adoption and pre-adoptive) should receive thorough counseling and training.** Their education should address the challenges and benefits of various levels of openness for everyone in the Extended Family of Adoption (that is, birth and adoptive relatives), as well as help in thinking through the implications of their choices, for now and into the future. All decision-making should be embedded in ethical practice that maximizes self-determination and full disclosure. Parents who feel pressured to choose a certain level of openness are less likely to feel satisfied or successful, so non-directive practices are critically important.

- **All parents who choose open adoption should receive training on the factors that are important to achieving successful relationships, including strategies for working through tensions and maintaining a child-centered focus.** The Adoption Institute is developing a curriculum to meet the need for this preparation, along with a trainer's guide and a PowerPoint presentation.

- **All parents should be offered post-adoption services in order to work through any challenges they encounter in relation to openness.** Most often, such services involve brief phone consultations or in-person counseling, but some agencies offer groups to support and assist members of both birth and adoptive families.

- **Additional research should be conducted to better understand the factors that promote successful open adoption relationships and ways in which practitioners can support them.** While research has confirmed that most parties in open adoptions are satisfied with their relationships, and has identified clear benefits for all involved, less is known about the evolution of these relationships and the types of strategies and services that are needed to assist families.

Conclusion

Many societal changes have resulted in complex arrangements in which children manage membership in multiple families, brought about through divorce and remarriage, assisted reproductive technologies, and foster care and adoption. Adoption scholars recognize that open adoption also has redefined the words "extended family," leading us to be more inclusive about the roles of adults connected to the child (Pertman, 2000; Wegar, 2006; Grotevant, 2007; Jones & Hackett, 2011). Research and practice illuminate the wide variety of ways in which open adoption can succeed, and underscore that it can benefit everyone involved.

Putting an end to secrecy in adoption does not erase the grief or loss embedded in the experience; it does, however, empower participants by providing them with information and access so that they can face and deal with facts instead of fantasies. Adoption-related laws, agency policies and clinical practices should support the autonomy, self-determination, truth-telling and family connections of adopted people and their birth and adoptive relatives. Greater education and training, along with ongoing research into how different kinds of open adoption journeys affect their participants, can help to guide and improve policy, practice – and lives.