

THE DONALDSON ADOPTION INSTITUTE

OPENNESS IN ADOPTION: WHAT A CONCEPT!

An Educational Curriculum Developed by

The Donaldson Adoption Institute

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We wish to thank the Lost Daughters for spearheading the *Flip the Script* campaign in November 2014, as a way to ensure that the voices of adopted people were central in conversations about the adoption experience during National Adoption Awareness Month and throughout the year. You can learn more about this campaign and the Lost Daughters at <http://www.thelostdaughters.com/p/flipthescript.html>.

Finally, DAI wishes to thank all of our supporters and those who contribute to our vital work.

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I. GENERAL OVERVIEW

Welcome! Thank you for taking the time to learn all you can about openness in adoption and to incorporate these relationships into your extended family of adoption.

A. The Curriculum has several key components to it:

1. PowerPoint: There are three parts that comprise “Openness in Adoption: What a Concept!” These will be discussed in further detail below. The three parts are:
 - a. Exploring Openness in Adoption
 - b. Experiencing Openness in Adoption
 - c. Living Openness in Adoption
2. Exercises: Each part contains exercises, which allows you to practice what you are learning in the PowerPoint slides. The instructions and exercise materials are located in Appendix One of the User’s Guide.
3. Video Clips: There are video and/or audio clips in each part, which serve to provide real life examples of experiences with open adoption. You may pause the PowerPoint and watch as they come up or you can wait until the end of the part to watch the video clips.
4. Documentary: A documentary is included with this curriculum. You may watch this at any time; however, it may have the greatest impact if you watch it at the conclusion of the three parts. The documentary follows families who are living openness in adoption and share their experiences with this unique family form.
5. Certificate of Completion: After each part, a short quiz is available for you to complete. A score of 80% on each quiz will allow you to obtain a certificate of completion. **Please note that this curriculum has not been approved for CEUs or any other professional certification or continuing education units.**
6. References: A full list of references is located in Appendix Three of the User’s Guide.

B. How to Use This Curriculum

1. This curriculum has been designed for maximum flexibility and for use in a variety of settings. For professionals who wish to use this to train clients, please contact DAI for a comprehensive trainer’s guide.
2. This curriculum can be used by individuals and couples who are seeking to adopt or who have adopted, as well as individuals or couples who have relinquished a

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child to adoption and are navigating open adoption. This may also be useful for those who are interested in learning more about this foundational aspect of adoption today. Once you have downloaded or accessed the full curriculum, you can complete it at a pace that is comfortable for you. After completing one part, it is often useful to complete the exercises either on your own or with your partner if you are adopting as a couple. Please be sure you watch the video clips and listen to the audio clips that are included in each part as well. Keep a notebook handy to take notes and jot down thoughts and questions you may have as you review the information.

3. You can always go back and re-watch sections of each part. Once the curriculum is downloaded, it is yours permanently and you can always access the materials on our website. Reflecting back on this material as you navigate your adoption journey can be a useful refresher!

II. KEY DEFINITIONS AND TERMS

- A. Adoption: the social, emotional and legal process in which children who will not be raised by their birth parents become full and permanent legal members of another family while maintaining genetic and psychological connections to their birth family.
(Child Welfare Information Gateway)
- B. Openness in Adoption/Open Adoption: “An arrangement agreed to by the adoptive parents and first/birth parents in which there is an ongoing connection between them, to be determined by the parties involved. Open adoption ranges from what some people call open, but is actually semi-open, to a full relationship with ongoing connection and visits. Openness often varies over time depending on the child and the parents’ understanding of roles and responsibilities.”
(Pavao, 2005, p.134)
- C. Expectant Parent: An individual or couple who is currently expecting a biological child. They may be considering a variety of options surrounding their pregnancy, including parenting, temporary foster care, community resource assistance or possibly adoption by either relatives or strangers. An expectant parent should **not** be referred to as a first/birth parent.
- D. First/Birth Parent: An individual who has relinquished their parental rights to adoption or their parental rights were terminated by the state due to concerns for the child’s safety/well-being.
- E. Adoptive Parent: An individual or couple who has legally adopted a child of whom they are not the biological parent.

- F. **Adopted Person:** A person who joins a family through adoption and was raised by a non-biological parent(s). They may have been raised by a relative (biological or non-biological) through the process of kinship adoption.
- G. **The Extended Family of Adoption:** The extended family of adoption refers to individuals who have a personal connection to adoption. Primarily, this is the First/Birth Parent, Adopted Person and the Adoptive Parent. This is also inclusive of other relatives and family members who are also impacted by the adoption experience (e.g., siblings, first/birth grandparents and other family).
- H. **Foster Child:** A child who is being temporarily cared for by an individual other than their biological parent(s) typically due to child welfare concerns. The child may be cared for by a relative or someone previously unknown to them.
- I. **Foster Parent:** A person who has been trained and licensed through a state child welfare agency to provide temporary care to a child who is currently unable to be cared for by their biological parent(s).
- J. **Domestic Adoption:** Adoption of children who reside in the U.S., either through the public child welfare system or private adoption.
- K. **Child Welfare Adoption:** Also referred to as adoption from foster care. This type of adoption occurs for children whom the state has determined that reunification with their first/birth parent(s) is not possible for safety or other reasons. These types of adoptions are arranged by state child welfare agencies or by private agencies under contract with states.
- L. **Private Adoption:** Can be arranged either through an agency or an attorney. In agency adoption, children are placed through a non-profit or for-profit agency that is licensed by the state to provide adoption services including the placement of children for adoption. In other types of private adoption, children are placed directly with adoptive parents by first/birth parents or with the help of a facilitator or attorney depending on each state's regulations.
- M. **Intercountry Adoption:** The adoption of children from other countries by U.S. citizens. They are usually arranged through adoption agencies. The U.S. Department of State oversees intercountry adoptions and rules and regulations since this type of adoption differ by country of origin and whether or not the country is a party to the Hague Convention.

- N. Transracial Adoption: This is a subgroup of both domestic and intercountry adoption and refers to children who are placed for adoption with families of a different race or ethnicity from the child.

- O. Kinship Adoption: An adoption where a relative, such as a grandparent, an aunt/uncle or a close family friend, adopts the child. They may or may not be biologically related to the child as well.

Sources: www.childwelfare.gov/topics/adoption/intro

www.childwelfare.gov

III. Part One: Exploring Openness in Adoption

A. Key Objectives

1. To discuss and explore participants' thoughts and feelings about openness in adoption
2. To learn some history surrounding openness in adoption
3. To review facts about openness in adoption
4. To define the concept of openness in adoption

B. Summary of Main Points

1. Many times, individuals and couples who are embarking on their adoption journey, or are already immersed in their adoption experience, may have a variety of fears and worries about openness in adoption. These come from many places including inaccurate depictions in the media, the historical stigmas and stereotypes that have negatively impacted adoption, and some of the differences in race, class and culture that are often a part of the adoption experience.
2. It is vital that individuals and couples look for fact-based resources, such as legitimate research studies, in order to learn more about adoption. The research base is clear that open adoption has offered many benefits to all members of the extended family of adoption.
3. What is always critical is that adoption planning, including developing relationships through open adoption, has the child as the center of the planning. Just as adoption is intended to be in the best interest of the child, how we navigate this experience after an adoption takes place must always ensure the child is the focus.
4. When adults are able to communicate about their natural fears and worries about openness, open themselves to learning more about this concept, and reach out for supports from professionals and other families, they are often better able to plan in a way that benefits the child as well as the family as a whole.

Challenge yourself to think outside the box about openness in adoption and be flexible in imagining the many different possibilities these relationships hold. You

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will find as you navigate this journey that in many ways, these relationships are no different from other diverse relationships you have in your life. So keep an open mind and remember to plan on behalf the child.

C. Additional Resources

1. The Donaldson Adoption Institute has conducted research on Open Adoption. This comprehensive report, "[Openness in Adoption: From Secrecy and Stigma to Knowledge and Connections](#)," provides a thorough overview of the history of adoption and how we got to openness as well as facts and data surrounding the open adoption experience.
2. Renowned author and practitioner Joyce Maquire Pavao has authored a comprehensive book, [The Family of Adoption](#), which provides significant insight into many aspects of the adoption experience and offers information surrounding authentic open adoption experiences.

IV. Part Two: Experiencing Openness in Adoption

A. Key Objectives

1. To talk about different types and understandings of openness in adoption
2. To understand how different members of the extended family of adoption experience openness
3. To review examples of different family experiences with openness

B. Summary of Main Points

1. Communicating about adoption in age and developmentally appropriate ways is one type of openness that benefits all family members (particularly the child). When families also develop relationships between first/birth and adoptive family members, communicating about adoption can occur with greater ease as more information is available.
2. Parents should communicate with children in age and developmentally appropriate ways about the facts of the adoption as well as the thoughts and feelings that surround the practical components. Parents should not wait for children to initiate these conversations; rather they should initiate discussions with normal regularity and set a tone that conversations about adoption are always welcome.

3. Although not a panacea, openness in adoption has been shown to benefit first/birth parents, adoptive parents and adopted people in many ways.
4. According to research, first/birth parents are often able to come to a greater sense of peace surrounding the adoption with the ongoing knowledge openness affords. In addition, they have reported experiencing a greater sense of self-determination when openness is involved.
5. Adoptive parents report feeling greater satisfaction with the adoption experience when openness is involved, a greater sense of permanence, and greater ease in navigating adoption conversations with their children.
6. Adopted people gain a greater sense of knowledge about their full history through openness, an opportunity to have physical touchstones, and overall, a greater satisfaction with adoption when openness is involved.

C. Additional Resources

1. [The Lost Daughters](#) is a powerful blog that offers insight and content authored by adopted people.
2. [The Open-Hearted Way to Open Adoption: Helping Your Child Grow Up Whole](#) offers information and supports for adoptive parents who are experiencing open adoption.

V. Part Three: Living Openness in Adoption

A. Key Objectives

1. To re-conceptualize openness within family relationship terms
2. To identify qualities that enhance relationship building
3. To explore strengths and challenges in building relationships between first/birth and adoptive families
4. To develop skills to live openness in adoption in a healthy and fulfilling way

B. Summary of Main Points

1. Families may feel a greater sense of ease building relationships between first/birth and adoptive families when they are able to think about other diverse family relationships they likely may have some experience with such as step parenting and blended families.

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2. Written agreements can be useful at the outset of the relationship building as a way to set some general parameters and balance expectations; what's critical though is that these are not used coercively and that families are able to be flexible. As your family, and child grows and develops, your needs will change here. Be open to those possibilities!
3. There are many different ways for first/birth and adoptive families to stay in touch with one another and the child should always be included in appropriate ways based on their age, development and unique characteristics of the adoption.
4. It is vital that all family members are committed to maintaining this relationship in the best interest of the child; open communication, empathy, active listening and honesty are just some of the key elements that are necessary to sustain these relationships.
5. Challenges may arise in the open adoption relationships, just as they do in other relationships at times in our lives. Communicating with empathy, engaging in authentic dialogue and reaching out for supports when needed are important steps to take when challenges arise. Shutting the door to the relationship as a first course of action is rarely appropriate and usually not in anyone's best interest.
6. Just like in other relationships in our lives, compromise and flexibility are critical components of successful relationships.

C. Additional Resources

1. Supports are always important as individuals experience the lifelong journey of adoption. Tapping into resources like the [Center for Adoption Support and Education](#) as well as the [North American Council on Adoptable Children](#) may prove useful in connecting you with qualified professionals and/or mutual aid groups that can serve as important networks for your family to stay strong.
2. Amy Seek's book [God and Jetfire: Confessions of a Birth Mother](#) discusses the strengths and challenges inherent in an open adoption experience.
3. [Flip the Script: Adult Adoptee Anthology](#) features the diverse experiences of adopted people including the experiences of those who are transracially and/or transculturally adopted.

VI. Conclusion

- A. We are so grateful that you have taken the time to use this curriculum to learn more about openness in adoption and ideally ensure your family stays strong! Don't forget to watch the documentary that accompanies the curriculum. Families in adoption today have the amazing ability to provide an adoption experience that isn't shrouded in secrecy or tainted with shame. With openness, parents from birth and adoption can offer the child an opportunity to know all the chapters of their life, and seek to assuage the disquiet that comes from being unable to answer the basic questions of humanity. While openness will never take away all of the losses that members of the extended family of adoption experience in unique ways, it can make the adoption experience more real and fulfilling. What a concept!
- B. DAI has a variety of initiatives that are dedicated to keeping children and families who are connected to adoption and foster care adoption healthy and strong. Learn more and stay up-to-date on DAI's latest news and initiatives:
1. [Sign up for updates](#) from DAI including our quarterly newsletter.
 2. Learn more about our [Let's Adopt Reform](#) initiative, which aims to strengthen all families by igniting a national conversation about adoption and foster care adoption in the 21st century:
 - a. [Sign up](#) to receive alerts.
 - b. Sign our [Open Letter](#), which outlines our vision for strong families and needed reforms.
 - c. Share your [adoption experience](#) in our online gallery, which is a digital platform that represents the kaleidoscope of experiences in adoption and foster care.
 3. Learn about our newest initiative, "[Building Strong Families](#)," which is a partnership with the Adoptive and Foster Family Coalition of New York. "Building Strong Families" addresses the need for resources, education and funding for quality and accessible post-adoption services (PAS).

Appendix One

EXERCISE ONE

Directions: Read through each of the following family examples. Which of these feels like “open” adoption to you? Do any of these examples feel uncomfortable to you? What do you think is the best way to define openness in adoption?

- ▶ Sally, the birth parent, received a profile about the adoptive parents, Mark and Gary. Mark and Gary received information about Sally’s background, including medical, ethnicity, and other cultural and social facts. They know each other’s first names but haven’t met. Mark and Gary agree to send photos once yearly through the agency and an update until their child is five years old.

- ▶ Sue and Derek adopted Karen when she was six days old. For the past eight years, Sue and Derek meet once per year with Maria, Karen’s birth mother. They send pictures and an update through email twice per year to Maria. Karen does not attend the meeting or participate in sending emails. Sue and Derek have told Karen that they adopted her and that her birth mother loved her very much, which is why she made an adoption plan.

- ▶ Marybeth placed her daughter for adoption as a newborn with Carol and Nancy. Marybeth meets with Carol, Nancy and their daughter, Kayla (now five years old) a few times a year. Marybeth watched Kayla recently for the weekend when Carol and Nancy traveled out of state to attend a wedding. Marybeth invited Carol and Nancy to her own wedding and Kayla will be a flower girl.

- ▶ Jessica and Rick adopted Naomi and Xavier from foster care when the children were five and eight years old. Naomi and Xavier’s birth mother, Rachael, struggles with substance use and is frequently incarcerated. Their birth father is deceased. Naomi and Xavier were in the same foster home for 18 months with an elderly couple who wasn’t able to adopt them but were close with the children. They also saw their paternal grandparents a few times per year. Their grandparents currently live in an assisted living facility as their grandfather has dementia. Jessica and Rick take Naomi and Xavier to see their grandparents regularly. They also have occasional overnights at their foster home and Jessica and Rick included their foster parents in Naomi’s recent birthday celebration.

EXERCISE TWO

Directions: Review the family examples below. Think about how openness played a role or didn't play a role. What are the strengths and challenges in each of these situations? What were the positive and negative outcomes for people?

- ▶ Sally (age 17) and her mother met with Margaret (age 40) and decided that Margaret should adopt Matthew, Sally's newborn son. Sally said she wanted to put the adoption experience behind her and wanted no further contact with Margaret or Matthew. Sally's mother, however, was tearful when she explained that this was her first grandchild and she hoped to stay in touch and hear how Matthew was doing. Margaret, thinking of Matthew's possible needs in the future, told Sally and her mother that Margaret would send them a letter and pictures every six months, so in case Matthew ever had questions or needed to meet Sally, the two mothers would still be in touch. Margaret invited Sally to write to her if she had any questions about how Matthew was doing. Margaret invited the birth grandmother to send cards and gifts, if she wished to, around Matthew's birthday and at Christmas.
- ▶ You are nine years old. You know you're adopted but your parents are unable to tell you anything but general, vague information about your birthparents. They've shown you all the paperwork the agency gave them when you were born and adopted. So you lie in bed at night wondering about all your unanswered questions. You sit in school, wondering instead of listening to the teacher. When you go outdoors, you wonder if you're walking right past a biological relative. You wonder why you were adopted and who you really are. No matter how hard you think about all this, you still don't know the answers. You ask your parents and they empathize with your feelings but can't answer your questions. You come up with all kinds of explanations like your birth mother is a princess, your birth father is in prison, your birth mother is from a foreign country, and your birth father is a famous actor and a millionaire. You think and think and think. You wonder what is so terrible about your birth parents that you're not allowed to know them. And what is so terrible about you that no one is allowed to know the truth?

EXERCISE THREE

Directions: Review the family examples below. How would you navigate these situations? What are some ways to respond? What supports may be needed to assist the families in these examples?

- ▶ Sue and Derek became parents through adoption three months ago when they were placed with their daughter Karen at three days old. They have communicated one to two times per month with Maria, Karen's birth mother, usually through email but occasionally through text. Maria's mother, Gloria, recently sent an email to Sue and Derek. Sue and Derek had met Gloria at the hospital when Karen was born. Gloria and Maria recently sent a card to Sue, Derek and Karen congratulating them on the recent finalization of the adoption. They signed the card "Mom and Grandma."

- ▶ Mary and Gary are proud parents to Xavier, whom they adopted seven years ago as an infant. Initially, they only sent yearly updates through their agency to Sally, Xavier's birth mother. However, when Xavier was three, they all agreed to meet and have done so once or twice a year ever since. Sally recently sent a card to Mark and Gary indicating that she is pregnant and is due in a few months. She will be parenting this child. Mark, Gary and Xavier have a scheduled meeting with Sally coming up about a month after Sally will give birth. Sally indicates she is excited for Xavier to meet his little sister after she arrives.

- ▶ Carol and Nancy and their daughter, Kayla, have had contact several times per year with Marybeth, Kayla's birth mother, ever since Kayla was born. Kayla is now 10 years old. Over the past year, Marybeth has taken longer in responding to emails and calls. She cancelled a recent meeting several months ago and Carol and Nancy have heard nothing since. Carol and Nancy have been reaching out to Marybeth over the past month to reschedule the meeting and have had no response. Their recent card came back undeliverable.

- ▶ Matthew and Ciara adopted their daughter, Sonya, from China when she was eight months old. She is now six. Matthew and Ciara adopted again – this time from the United States. Their son, Jackson, is now four years old. They had met with Jackson's birth mother and father once per year with the children since Jackson was born. Sonya recently has been asking more questions about her birth mother and also wants to have visits with her. Matthew and Ciara have almost no information about Sonya's birth mother. Matthew and Ciara recently cancelled an upcoming visit with Jackson's birth parents. They have not responded yet to requests to reschedule.

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Appendix Two

Documentary Discussion Questions

1. The adopted people at the start of the movie discussed many reasons their “closed” adoptions were difficult for them. Can you relate to these difficulties? In what way?
2. In the movie, it is stated that “Information, explanation, relationships all make an adopted person feel whole.” In what way do these elements help ALL of us feel whole?
3. For transracial adoptive families, what are the additional benefits to maintaining relationships between first/birth and adoptive family members?
4. What were some of the initial fears of adoptive parents surrounding open adoption? Can you relate to any of these? How are these fears developed? How were they assuaged?
5. How can adoptive parents best prepare their extended families and friendship circles to understand open relationships in adoption? Why is this important?
6. How do relationships in open adoption evolve over time? Do you see yourself being flexible in these arrangements? Why or why not?
7. In the movie, many adoptive couples discussed how they could participate in developing the openness arrangement. It is also important for first/birth parents to be able to develop the plan. How do you see yourself navigating this? How will you make sure the decisions you make in this relationship are reflective of what your child will need?
8. Some people in the movie also discussed staying in touch with extended family members of the first/birth mother. What is your comfort level in expanding your relationships? What informs that decision?
9. What benefits did first/birth parents discuss from having openness in adoption? What are some challenges specifically for first/birth parents?
10. Many people have offered that while openness in adoption is a more humane way to practice adoption, it will never take away the many losses that are embedded in the adoption experience. What does this statement mean for you? Do you agree or disagree with it? Why?
11. How are relationships in open adoption similar to other family dynamics/modern family arrangements? Does this analogy help in navigating this experience?
12. What are your other takeaways from this video? What would you add to this discussion?

Appendix Three

References

Openness in Adoption: What a Concept has been informed by research conducted by a variety of sources which are listed below.

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