

**Understanding Options Counseling Experiences in Adoption:
A Quantitative Analysis of Birth Parents and Professionals**

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

While no official statistics are kept regarding the number of domestic infant adoptions each year (Simmonds & Likis, 2005; Zamostny, O'Brien, Baden, & Wiley, 2003), rough estimates suggest that approximately 38 percent of all adoptions in the United States are private domestic (Vandivere, Malm, & Radel, 2009). The vast majority of these adoptions involve infants. Adoption practice has changed drastically over the past 50 years and with that some important gains have been made in strengthening expectant parents' rights (Donaldson Adoption Institute, 2007; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2013). Despite these gains, there is little uniformity across states, or even among agencies, regarding the adoption process or the types and formats of information that is shared with expectant parents who are considering relinquishing their parental rights to their child for adoption. Options counseling refers to an individualized assessment and counseling process whereby women and men who are experiencing a crisis or unintended pregnancy are assisted in objectively evaluating their options (i.e., parenting the child, relinquishment of parental rights to the child for adoption, termination of the pregnancy, as well as other options such as temporary foster care or placement with relatives). Parents are supported in making a decision based on their own personal values, needs, and preferences. This process is vital to ensuring that expectant parents are able to make a decision free of coercion, misinformation, and outside pressures (Donaldson Adoption Institute, 2007; Johnson & Faase, 2012; Samuels, 2005; Singer, 2004). Despite the ethical and best-practice implications of ensuring expectant parents have access to bias-free options counseling, only about half of states in the United States even mention counseling in laws relating to adoption, and of those most merely advise, rather than mandate, that expectant parents be made aware that counseling is available (Donaldson Adoption Institute, 2007; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2013a).

To date, no research has been conducted to determine the frequency or manner with which adoption agencies and other adoption practitioners provide expectant parents with information about the full range of available options. The Donaldson Adoption Institute (DAI) first explored the subject in their 2007 report "[Safeguarding the Rights and Well-Being of Birthparents in the Adoption Process](#)". The report concluded, "In reality, we do not know the extent to which all options are presented to women seeking counseling for unplanned pregnancies or in what manner they are presented, because research has not addressed this question in the past two decades" (p. 29). To gain a fuller understanding of the context in which options are presented and discussed with expectant parents facing a crisis pregnancy, the Donaldson Adoption Institute partnered with The University of Texas at Arlington to conduct the first significant study on the subject.

The primary objective of this study was to understand the decision-making experiences of women and men who have placed a child for adoption, as well as the context in which options surrounding crisis pregnancies are discussed with expectant parents by professionals in the adoption community. Because this study sought to learn more about an area that has been sparsely researched, a mixed-method approach was utilized to address the questions posed in this study.

"I truly don't feel as though there are enough protections in place for birthmothers or resources out there to help us make an informed choice. I think if I had more help and resources, and the ability to not have the prospective parents (and my parents) pressure me the way that they did, I think my life would be very different."

—birth mother

As such, the study was designed to include two distinct phases. Phase I consisted of a survey with birth parents and a survey with adoption professionals. This phase of the study sought to examine the types of services, materials, information, and support offered to birth parents when they were considering adoption as a choice for their child. Professionals involved in private adoptions were also invited to participate in a survey that examined what services, materials, and interventions they provide as a part of their routine practices with birth parents seeking information on adoption. Phase II consisted of a subsample of the larger study for in-depth analysis regarding the opinions of birth parents and adoption professionals for what should be discussed and offered to parents seeking information on adoption. The current report represents Phase I of the study and includes findings from two online surveys (i.e., survey of birth parents and a survey of adoption professionals). In order to understand the full complexity of the adoption experience, it is important to start with the experiences of birth parents.

Major Findings from Birth Parents

Of the 223 birth mothers in the study, more than two-thirds reported that they seriously considered other options besides adoption, most commonly to parent their child. However, the majority of birth mothers who participated in this study also reported limited to no access to information about parenting. Furthermore, an overwhelming majority indicated they would have liked more knowledge about resources that could help them potentially parent their child. Supportive services is a broad term that is typically inclusive of emotional and social support but also more tangible resources, such as financial and housing assistance. For many of the birth mothers in this study, the lack of emotional and social support they felt they needed to successfully parent was one of the deciding factors in their decision to relinquish their parental rights to their child for adoption. Similarly, financial and housing concerns provided additional pressure, with approximately four of

“Adoption was presented to me from the very beginning as the only realistic option for someone with as little resources as me, but I never wanted to place and tried hard for many months to defend keeping her. Being told that I could have an open adoption with as much contact as I wanted was ultimately the most influential thing I was told that made me accept adoption . . . the information on adoption and parenting given to me by the agency was very one-sided and incredibly misleading. I was never given any information on the trauma caused to both mother and child though separation. So far my adoption experience has been nothing like what the agency told me I could expect. I feel as though I was coerced into making the worst decision of my life—one I will suffer and regret for the rest of my life.”

—birth mother

every five birth mothers in this study citing financial concerns as one of the reasons they chose to relinquish their parental rights to their child for adoption. The findings of this study suggest that pressure is experienced from a variety of sources, with the most common sources being immediate family.

As birth mothers reported about the available people in their personal life who could provide support, a common phenomenon that emerged was that of isolation. Approximately half of the birth mothers lacked family or friends with whom they could share their concerns and feelings. Isolation, in this instance, does not mean that their families and friends were physically absent from the lives of the birth parents in this study. Rather, the responses of birth mothers suggest that they

felt their families were unavailable for emotional and practical support to help them make a decision regarding their pregnancy that allowed for thoughtful consideration of other alternatives, specifically parenting their child. This experience of isolation during the decision-making process was likely compounded by the feeling many birth mothers had of professionals (i.e., attorneys, agency professionals/caseworkers, and/or counselors) working their case who failed to advocate with family members to support their interests.

Attorneys were the professionals least likely to be perceived as advocates. This finding is somewhat expected given that only about one in five of the birth mothers had access to their own legal representation. Typically, this meant the attorney “representing” the mother was employed by the prospective adoptive parents or the adoption agency. About half of the birth mothers who shared their experiences expressed that they did not have sufficient time, or opportunity, to speak privately with the attorney as a family member was often in the meeting with them.

Furthermore, the responses of birth mothers who reported on information they received from an attorney, suggest that there was little consistency in the information they were provided with in regards to the content or scope of the topics discussed. When birth mothers were asked about specific types of options, services, and legal rights that would have been beneficial to understand during the decision-making process, anywhere from one-third to three-quarters of the respondents indicated that they did not receive pertinent information from an attorney. A common theme in the responses of birth mothers was a desire for increased information regarding the various legal aspects of adoption.

For many of the birth mothers, the experiences they had with attorneys were mirrored with other professionals with whom they worked. While each type of professional (i.e., attorneys, agency professional/ caseworkers, and counselors) possessed different strengths, independent counselors were the group most likely to be viewed by birth mothers as advocates. Additionally, the findings also show that compared to their counterparts, independent counselors were more likely to provide birth mothers with information about the various options available to them, as well as information about specific resources in the community related to parenting. According to the findings, agency professionals/caseworkers were the group most likely to provide information about services and legal aspects of adoption, while attorneys were more likely to focus on specific topics within the more narrow scope of their expertise. Regardless, birth mothers experienced a tremendous amount of inconsistency with regard to the information that was shared with them and how the information was discussed.

The findings indicate that the experiences of many birth mothers, as they moved from pregnancy through decision-making to relinquishment and post-adoption, were traumatic and were punctuated by limited information and resources, external pressures, and lack of support. However, the findings also show that one-third of birth mothers who participated in the study experienced a more successful and less burdensome decision-making and relinquishment experience. For these women, the decision to relinquish their parental rights to their child for adoption was largely based on their own wishes. Additionally, this subset of birth mothers reported satisfaction with their decision to relinquish.

“I stand by my decision 1000%. It was the right decision and I love my son's family. I still feel regret. Knowing that you did the best thing doesn't mean you get to never feel regret.”

–birth mother

Major Findings from Adoption Professionals

The adoption professionals (N=141) who participated in the survey were highly educated, with most having at least a Master's degree, and tended to have a demonstrated commitment to the field, with slightly less than three-fourths of adoption professionals having worked for five or more years. Concurrently, most respondents report feeling a high level of confidence in the provision of services. Additionally, adoption professionals in this study reported receiving training from a variety of different sources, with the vast majority receiving on-the-job training. As there are no uniform standards that agencies are mandated to follow, this training varies from agency to agency. Additionally, few professionals reported attending adoption-focused conferences, which would offer the opportunity to share new practices with others and to gain new perspectives from other members of the adoption triad who may be in attendance.

Differences among agencies may also be reflected in the responses of participants regarding the number of expectant mothers with whom they worked during the year and in the number of sessions they had with each mother. While a clear plurality of participants had a significant number of face-to-face visits with the mothers (6-9), about as many had five or fewer as those who had 10 visits or more. This significant variation in the number of visits may be linked to training or rapport with the mothers. Of course, this difference may also be reflected in the time at which the expectant mother comes to the agency (late in the pregnancy versus early in the pregnancy). Professionals employed by a private agency were significantly more likely to have increased face-to-face sessions with expectant mothers.

Little uniformity was found in the types of information and materials that were provided to expectant mothers. While nearly every participant reported providing written materials regarding adoption, less than half provided access to videos or other visual materials and only slightly more provided website information. When asked about providing information and materials regarding parenting, all participants reported doing this less frequently, regardless of the type of materials. Written materials were still the most commonly provided materials at about three-quarters; however, no other types of materials and/or contacts were available to more than half of respondents. In fact, information from other expectant parents considering adoption and parents who considered adoption but chose to parent were among the least available sources of information.

When asked about the frequency with which they discussed specific topics, nearly every participant reported discussing the topics either most of the time or all of the time. Conversations relating to termination of the pregnancy were the only exception to this trend. Slightly more than a quarter of the participants reported discussing the option to terminate a pregnancy with every client, and the proportion increased to about one-third when factoring in those who said they do this most of the time. Additionally, when discussing community resources where termination could be sought, about one-third reported always providing this information but almost 40 percent said they never do. The lack of dialogue about abortion/termination could possibly be attributed to the faith-based nature of many adoption agencies. However, it may be a reflection of the fact that many birth parents in the survey had already weighed termination prior to seeking services from adoption professionals and determined it was not a suitable option moving forward.

Key Recommendations

- ***Develop and Adopt Best-Practice Guidelines for The Provision of Options Counseling*** - Adoption professionals reported providing information at a greater frequency than birth mothers reported receiving it. Due to the external forces that pressure many expectant mothers to consider

adoption and the physical and emotional toll of pregnancy and delivery, expectant mothers may benefit from multiple conversations, when possible, to ensure that they are able to adequately weigh the information and assess the various services available. To counter the discrepancy between the agency professionals' and birth mothers' reported experiences surrounding different types of information, national guidelines should be developed and adopted that clearly delineate the specific information that should be discussed with expectant parents.

- ***Develop and Adopt Evidence-based Written Materials about Options*** - Birth mothers reported varying degrees of access to written information about their options. Therefore, the provision of evidence-based written materials about all options should be established as a best practice. This material should be regulated, and perhaps developed at the national level to foster uniformity and reduce bias in the information provided to expectant parents. Additionally, the materials should be made available online for wide distribution. Adoption professionals could be mandated to provide this material to all expectant parents as a starting point for more in-depth exploration of supports available in their community. In addition, having well-developed written materials that can be shared with family and friends may result in natural support systems who are better informed and, thus, more capable of assisting expectant parents as they consider their options.
- ***Establish Best-Practice Guidelines for Persons Providing Options Counseling*** - Birth mothers overwhelmingly reported the helpfulness of access to independent counselors. Additionally, a greater number of birth mothers reported receiving more information about the full range of their options from counselors than attorneys or agency professionals. While some states mandate that expectant parents either be provided or made aware of counseling services, few provide guidelines for who should offer this service. This finding suggests that independent counselors may not only be the most likely to present options counseling to expectant parents, but also that they may be best suited to provide information on options in an impartial and non-biased manner. Therefore, best practices guidelines about the use of independent counselors for expectant parents in a crisis pregnancy should be established.
- ***Increase Expectant Parents' Access to Support Groups and Other Parents*** - Isolation was a common experience for many of the birth mothers. However, only a small percentage were referred to support groups for expectant parents and there was no universal access to support groups post-adoption. Yet, at both stages, birth mothers who participated in these groups tended to find them a valuable source of support. Therefore, adoption professionals, particularly agency professionals/caseworkers who provide access to information and services, should prioritize the use of support groups involving birth parents who have placed a child, as well as those with other expectant parents who are considering adoption, during the decision-making and post-adoption phases of the process. Additionally, parents who considered adoption for their child, but instead who decided to continue parenting, should also be made available to expectant parents.
- ***Inform Expectant/New Parents about Available Financial and Housing Resources*** – Financial and housing concerns were the first and third, respectively, most common pressures birth mothers reported in their decision-making process. Financial concerns were the number one reason identified by birth mothers for relinquishing their parental rights. Adoption professionals, particularly agency professionals/caseworkers, have a responsibility to ensure that expectant/new parents are aware of public and private assistance programs that can provide financial and housing support. Greater information about social services could help reduce the financial pressures that ultimately lead some parents to relinquish their parental rights to their child for adoption.

- ***Provide Expectant/New Parents with Access to Unbiased Legal Representation*** - Birth mothers expressed a repeated desire for access to legal representation and information. While adoptive parents and adoption agencies typically have legal staff that represents their interests, it was not uncommon for birth mothers to report that they did not have access or support focused on ensuring that they fully understood applicable adoption statutes and their legal rights. It is imperative that expectant mothers have access to unbiased legal representation who can educate, support, and advocate for expectant parents as they deliberate their options. Furthermore, it is important for parents to have legal representation after the child is born, particularly if they are reconsidering the relinquishment of their parental rights or if their state has legally binding open adoption agreements.
- ***Establish and Adopt a Standard Waiting Period*** – A national standard for minimum wait periods before relinquishment papers can be signed should be established. While a high percentage of agency professionals supported a waiting period of three or fewer days after the child’s birth before relinquishment papers could be signed, many birth mothers supported a longer waiting period, with one in three supporting a period of 8 or more days. Since the decision to relinquish is so profound, providing an empirically supported wait period that is uniformly endorsed may reduce the parent’s distress, as well as increase a parent’s certainty about his or her ultimate decision. Additional research is needed to determine the most appropriate length for a minimum wait period.
- ***Best Practice Guidelines for Therapeutic Work with Expectant Parents*** – Adoption professionals utilize a wide array of therapeutic approaches in their work with expectant and birth mothers. Additional research is needed to ascertain the effectiveness of the approaches used in helping expectant parents more fully understand the implications of all of their options, explore the resources and services that are available to them, reduce the impact of external pressures on their decision-making process, and, ultimately, help them select the option that is best for them. It may be that certain interventions are more effective in empowering expectant mothers to make decisions throughout the process.
- ***Establish Best Practice Guidelines for Education and Therapeutic Work with Expectant Parents’ Families*** – Many of the birth mothers in this study reported a lack of emotional and social support during their decision making process. In fact, lack of support was one of the leading factors for many birth mothers in their decision to relinquish their parental rights to their child for adoption. Providing education and family counseling to expectant parents and their family members might provide a neutral forum for families to address miscommunications, needs, and emotional strains resulting from the pregnancy, which might allow family members to be a better support to the expectant parents’ during the decision-making process. Additionally, education about community resources could allay families’ fears that expectant parents would not be able to support their child.

Conclusion

Many birth mothers in the study indicated that relinquishing parental rights to their child for adoption was their best option at that time. However, for too many others, the lack of resources and support, compounded by the external pressures that many felt to choose adoption, created an environment that was void of choice and viable options. As a result, many birth mothers reported that their decision to relinquish their parental rights to their child for adoption has had a negative impact on their lives.

Parenting-focused information and services provided to the birth mothers ensures they will have the ability to make a truly informed decision about their options. For options counseling to be a just and effective practice, equal attention should be devoted to all options. Expectant parents deserve access to trained, informed, and unbiased adoption professionals (i.e., attorneys, agency professionals/caseworkers, and independent counselors) who will advocate for their rights and help ensure they have all of the necessary information and resources needed to make an informed decision. Safeguarding the rights of expectant parents will help ensure that adoption becomes a valid and coercion-free option that enables a parent to make the best decision for their child.