

08/19/09 - An Evolving "Open" Relationship



When people consider adopting domestically for an infant, one of their first concerns surrounds the Birthparents. I have heard many people in my Adoption Support Group state that they do not want to "co-parent" with anyone besides their spouse or partner. People also don't want to be committed to sending letters and pictures and maybe even have phone calls or visits with the Birthparents. People researching adoption hear the term "open adoption" and assume this openness is just so the Birthparents can be an intrusive part of the adoptive family's life.

Open Adoption? is actually used to describe a wide spectrum of sharing identifying information between the Birthparents and the adoptive parents. On one end of the spectrum is when everyone knows each other's first names and that is it. They may never meet each other. The other end of the "open adoption" spectrum is when there is little to no information hidden between everyone. The Birthparents could be present for family functions, call the adoptive family directly and are informed of everything that happens in the child's life.

Most adoptions nowadays fall somewhere in the middle of this openness spectrum. Some agencies even advertise to be in the middle of this spectrum by being a "semi-open" agency. This simply means that only non-identifying information is shared between the Birthparents and the adoptive parents. When the prospective adoptive parents create their profile to be seen by potential Birthparents they do not use their last name or tell where they live or work. All contact between the involved parties is done through the agency. A lot of couples in my Adoption Support Group tend to eventually choose an agency that is "semi-open" because they appreciate having set boundaries as to what information is to be shared and how.

Who Wants "Openness"??

People need to be very honest with themselves when deciding how open they would like their adoption to be. It is unfair to make promises to potential Birthparents because you want a quick adoption. For example, do not agree to four phone calls a year with them and then not follow through. Those Birthparents followed through with their plan by placing their child for adoption with you. They are now hoping for you to follow through with your promise to call with updates.

If the thought of having the Birthparents know where you live turns your stomach, then that is fine. Just be sure to discuss these concerns regarding openness with your agency/lawyer early on so they can match you with a situation that suits your needs. You should not be judged by the agency/lawyer as they want to create an ideal situation for everyone involved.

Some prospective adoptive parents assume that all Birthparents want to have a very open relationship with the adoptive parents. From the Birthmother panels I have listed to I can say this is not the case. Most Birthmothers just want to get some sort of feedback about how the child was doing. Getting letters and pictures of their child happy and being loved reinforces that their decision of placing their child for adoption was the right one.

All the Birthmothers I have talked to understand the clear distinction of their role versus the parenting role of the adoptive parents. When the Birthmothers decided to make an adoption plan they never wanted to ?co-parent? with the adoptive parents. They don't want to make any parenting decisions or disrupt the child's family. Birthparents counseling prior to the birth and afterward helped them figure out what the respectable boundaries with the adoptive parents should be.

An Evolving Relationship

Prospective adoptive parents should recognize that whatever kind of relationship they decide to pursue with the potential Birthparents may change over time. As with any relationship in life, time and circumstances can alter the intentions of the parties involved.

You could begin by participating in a "semi-open" adoption where all your child's Birthmother knows is your first name. After your adoption is finalized you may feel more relaxed and want to open up more to her. In your letters to the Birthmother you begin to include information about where you live. Since you're not far away you offer for everyone to meet up at a local park. From there your relationship with her begins to develop into something much more open than you ever imagined.

Another scenario could be that you began your relationship with your child's Birthmother by being very open about you and your life. You were invited to her prenatal visits, present at the birth and had visits together after placement. You picture your future with her as one where she is invited to family functions, such as your child's birthday parties. However the phone calls and letters from the Birthmother start coming less frequently over the years. She has gone back to school, met a new man and is going on with her life. She hasn't forgotten about you but you're not her main priority. What you envisioned as a very "open" and close relationship is now at much more of a distant one.

Personal Decisions

When Paul and I considered what type of relationship we wanted with the Birthparents of our future children, we both felt very comfortable having it very "open." In our minds we wouldn't have felt comfortable not being completely open to someone who was entrusting her child to us. However, this decision of being open was also because we chose to use an agency a few states away from us. I cannot say what our decision would have been should we have adopted with a local agency.

We approached all three of our adoptions as "open" as possible. Our adoption profile had our last name splashed across the top, said where we lived and shared that we were open to direct phone calls and visits if possible. Considering how much we read about "open adoptions," listened to others with open relationships and were open ourselves you'd think that between our three adoptions, we'd have a lot of Birthparents as an active role in our lives. Unfortunately, this isn't true. As I mentioned before, relationships change over time.

Our Attempts at "Open Adoptions?"

Our first adoption was easily the most "open" of the three. After being chosen by the potential Birthparents we called them directly every few days, flew to them for a visit during the pregnancy, went to the final prenatal visit and I was in the room during my Son's birth. I cherish all of these moments as I know I would not have had them had I not opened my heart to them as much as I did.

We developed a very close relationship with the Birthparents and were excited to see where it would lead. After placement we still talked over the phone about once a week for a few months. We visited them when we were in their town for our Son's finalization at six months of age. That was the last time we heard from the Birthmother. The Birthfather called on my Son's 1st Birthday which was the last time we had contact from him. My Son recently turned seven years old.

It breaks my heart that now this open relationship is only one sided. I still send letters and pictures to the Birthparents and write, "Please contact us" to no avail. It took almost two years after their contact ended for my heart not to drop when I checked the mailbox to find no letter from them. Odds are they got busy with their lives and we hope sometime down the road we can rekindle the relationship we once had. Recently my Son asked me if his Birthmother "was dead" because he

hasn't heard from her. Paul and I chose an open adoption so our child would not have to wonder about his Birthparents. When I don't have definite answers for him it tears me up.

Our daughter's adoption was a "hospital birth" which means the Birthmother selected our profile after the baby had been born. Therefore we could not have gotten to know the Birthmother prior to the birth. Our only meeting was after delivery and she was still on medication to relieve the pain from labor. Our conversation was simple and short. Due to her complicated life we did not foresee any open relationship with her. We did send letters and pictures but did not expect anything in return. That was actually OK with me because I was wary to open up my heart again to another Birthmother.

Two years after my daughter's birth we found out the Birthmother contacted the agency and wanted to talk to us. I had a lovely conversation with her and she sent us a letter and updated pictures of herself. We were excited to possibly have the beginning of another open relationship. That phone call and letter happened two and a half years ago. Nothing has happened since.

Our third adoption was another "hospital birth" and the Birthmother was already discharged from the hospital when we arrived in town. We had dinner with her after placement and it was a very pleasant experience. We've been sending her letters and pictures and even had a request from her for some more. As our Son is only a year old we are not sure where this relationship will lead but hope it continues over time.

True Intentions for "Openness?"

Some people could look at my personal stories and think, "Well maybe it worked out for the best. Now they don't have to deal with the complicated relationships with those Birthparents." But Paul and I wanted those relationships very badly. We

wanted to have answers for our children when they ask about their Birthparents.

We wanted to reassure their Birthparents how well loved and cared for everyone is so they will not think their adoption decisions were wrong. We wanted these relationships as a way to thank them for giving us the most amazing gifts ever, our children. Paul and I are very hopeful that in the future these relationship will become open once again, even if it's twenty years down the road.

Open adoption is not a way for the Birthparents to ?co-parent? with the adoptive parents. It's not a way for the adoptive parents to gain personal information about the Birthparents. It's a relationship between everyone in the best interest of the child. That is not anything to be fearful about.

You can choose what you are comfortable with at the beginning of the adoption process and will matched with potential Birthparents who share similar feelings. You also can choose to share more information with the Birthparents over time should you choose. It's an evolving relationship and you will not be able to predict the outcome.

On the topic of ?Open Adoption,? Paul and I often said, ?How can it be wrong? We're just adding more people who love our child into their lives.?

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