Growing Up in Open Adoption: Adoptive Families Look Back

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What I sought to find out

- ## The initial research questions (in 1989):

- What is open in your adoption

- How did you decide on open adoption

- How did you decide how open to be

- What do you now see as the advantages and disadvantages of open adoption

- What are your unanswered questions, anxieties, concerns

- What is your advice for adoption professionals and other parents

Research Design

- Snowball sampling method
- n=44 parents in 22 families
- Procedures to protect confidentiality and accuracy
- Follow up studies:
  - When the adoptees were ages 7 to 9
  - When the adoptees were ages 14 to 16
  - Now that the adoptees are young adults (interviewed adoptees AND adoptive parents)

Major Findings
(Infancy to age two)

- Phase 1 (infancy to age 2) (n=22 families)
  - Varying definitions of open adoption
  - Wide array of open adoption types
  - Different reasons for choosing open adoption
  - Overwhelming satisfaction with choosing open adoption

Major Findings
(Ages 7 to 9)

- Phase 2 (ages 7 to 9) (n= 44 adoptive parents)
  - Openness arrangements changed over time within families
  - Changes varied in terms of who participated in contact, when and how often it occurred, what contact consisted of
  - In no instance did adoptive parents report unilaterally cutting off contact
  - Parents continued to unambivalently endorse their choice of open adoption

Major Findings (Adolescence)

- Phase 3 (n= 31 adoptive parents)
    - Adoptive parents remained uniformly committed to maintaining contact with their children's birth parents and saw only benefits
    - In some families, challenges or discomforts in the relationships had arisen; parents saw these as opportunities for growth

Major Findings
(Young Adult Adoptees, Ages 18 to 23)

- All preferred knowing their birth parents over not knowing
- None saw *openness* in adoption as a major issue in their lives
- Many reported discomforts, issues and challenges

Major Findings

(Adoptive Parents of Young Adult Adoptees)

- All continued to endorese openness in adoption
- None felt that there had been too much openness

Predictable Challenges

- Adoptive parents mislead, deceive, break promises
- Birth parents fall out of contact, disappear
- Adoptive siblings have different levels of contact; rivalry, sadness, anger, confusion
- Child does not want contact with birth parents
- Birth parent says things that upset the child or adoptive parent
- The internet has opened up a new world of issues
- More…

Guidelines for Successful Open Adoption

Birth/foster/adoptive parent relationships work well

when they are based on:

>A Shared focus on putting the *child's* needs first

>Honesty

>Trust

>Respect

>Compassion and empathy for one another

>Communication of feelings, needs, fears

>Flexibility to change the plan as needed

These human qualities and principles are what make it work

Situations that may upset a child

◉The birthparent gives birth to a younger sibling and chooses to parent that child

◉The birthparent doesn't respond to the child's letters, facebook messages, phone calls

◉The birthparent marries

◉The birthparent stops sending a birthday card or holiday greeting

◉One adopted child in the family has more contact with his/her birthparent than another child adopted into the family has

◉The birthparent moves into the neighborhood

How to rethink the plan once you're living with it

- Talk to each other. Share your needs. Suggest some alternatives. Seek the other's input. Find an option both can live with

- Employ a trained and experienced open adoption mediator who can facilitate difficult conversations and do "shuttle diplomacy".

Examples of situations that might require a change of plan

- The child does not want to see or speak with the birth parent
- The birth/adoptive parent's life is too stressful right now to handle a planned visit
- The adoptive parent is uncomfortable with the birth parent's behavior during a visit
- The adoptive parent is uncomfortable with the contents of a letter, e-mail, conversation

Expect that needs may change

- Every open adoption agreement should explicitly include a way for the participants to renegotiate the agreement over time. It can be unrealistic to expect that the contact agreement that makes sense in infancy will also make sense in adolescence. Everyone's lives change over time.

Guidelines

- Plan for as much contact as *both* sets of parents are comfortable with
- Only make promises you can keep
- Nudging a door more open later is less hurtful than moving it less open
- Keep the door ajar. Instead of cutting people out completely, find a safer, more comfortable way to sustain connection.
- Keep the trail warm. Don't lose touch completely. That way, the child knows that access is possible.

Guidelines, CONTINUED

- Connect with other bio/adoptive parents living with open adoption, for support and ideas about how to cope with discomforts that may arise

- Adoptive parents: understand that birth parents may fear being scorned, judged, mistrusted, rejected

- Birth parents: understand that adoptive parents may fear the same things, in addition to your intruding in unwelcome ways, or doing something that hurts the child

Guidelines, continued

If there are face-to-face visits, use them as an opportunity to show the child that there is no competition between families. Birth and adoptive family members should use visits to do fun things *together*. Joint outings help the child feel safely enveloped in love by two sets of parents who are not competing for the child's loyalty.

Advice for Professionals

- Give us voice and choice
- Give us information; what to expect
- Do not tell us how to live our lives; do not try to control us
- Recognize that one size does not fit all

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