

Birthmothers' Experiences with Open Adoptions: Satisfaction and Disappointment and Long-term Adjustment

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to understand how birthmothers' long-term adjustment is related to how their experiences of openness compare to their original expectations, as well as external pressure to place and post-adoption support. Four birthmothers who were between 3 and 18 years post-adoption were interviewed about their decision to place, their experiences with the adoptive family, and their overall post-placement adjustment. All participants described feelings of grief and loss. However, birthmothers whose level of openness was either the same or better than expected also expressed pride and happiness, while those whose openness decreased reported feeling anger and despair over this perceived second loss. External pressure to relinquish and lack of post-adoption support appeared to exacerbate the disappointment of these unmet expectations.

I'm happy with my decision... The openness and love that we all have for one another I wouldn't change at all.

Results

- ❖ 3 out of 4 birthmothers experienced a change in openness
- ❖ Birthmothers whose experiences with openness either matched or exceeded their expectations felt the most satisfied and had the best long-term adjustment
- ❖ Birthmothers who experienced unexpected decreases in openness perceived this change as a second loss
- ❖ Post-adoption peer support was associated with feeling pride and confidence in the decision to relinquish despite any change in openness
- ❖ External pressure to relinquish was strongly related to regret over the decision and was associated with the worst long-term adjustment

It's not supposed to be like this. This was my nightmare.

Introduction

Studies suggest that open adoptions may alleviate birthmothers' grief and loss as well as provide valuable connections and information for their children. (Ge, Natsuaki, Martin, Leve, Neiderhiser, Shaw, Villareal, Scaramella, Reid, & Reiss, 2008). However, the term "open adoption," means many things from direct contact between the birth and adoptive families to indirect, mediated contact. Thus, how birth and adoptive parents interpret openness may vary, and, since contact agreements are not legally enforceable in most states, agreements often go unfulfilled. Cushman, Kalmuss, & Namerow (1993) found that many birth parents had not had the information and access that they had expected. We need to understand how birthmothers experience these unmet expectations because research suggests that a birthmother's satisfaction with the level of openness may be more important to her long-term adjustment than the actual amount of contact (Henney, McRoy, & Grotevant, 2007). The current study was designed to explore this relationship between birthmothers' experiences and expectations of openness with their long-term adjustment.

Method

- ❖ Birthmothers were recruited from online support groups
- ❖ Phone interviews lasted approximately 40-60 minutes
- ❖ Sample questions
 - ❖ How have your experiences with open adoption met or not met your expectations?
 - ❖ How supportive have family and friends been about your loss since the adoption?
 - ❖ How do you feel about the level of openness you currently have?
- ❖ Grounded theory approach was used to analyze transcribed interviews
- ❖ Primary researcher is a birthmother

Participant Demographics

- ❖ 4 birthmothers
- ❖ Current ages: 22-30 years old
- ❖ Birthmothers were 3, 6, 12 and 18 years post-placement

Every day I get to see that I did what was right. It makes me pretty proud.

The closer I get to [his birthday] the more upset I get because I know that his birthday will come with no update and I'm going to be broken hearted again.

Comparison of the open adoption experiences of participants and their long-term adjustment and satisfaction

	P1	P2	P3	P4
Experiences with Openness				
Expected level	Semi-Open	Semi-Open	Very Open	Open
Current level	Semi-Open	Closed	sporadic	Very Open
Desired level	Open	Semi-Open	Very Open	Very Open
Satisfaction with Openness	X			X
External Pressure to Relinquish			X	
Peer Support Post-adoption	X	X		X
Confident with Decision	X	X		X
Regret Decision			X	
Long-term Adjustment				
Pride	X	X		X
Happiness	X			X
Anger		X	X	
Despair		X	X	

Implications

- ❖ These findings underscore the importance of assuring that birthmothers and adoptive parents have clear agreements about openness
- ❖ Counselors mediating these adoptions need to:
 - ❖ Ensure that all parties have realistic expectations regarding openness
 - ❖ Protect birthmothers from external pressures to relinquish
 - ❖ Protect birthmothers from misleading promises of openness
 - ❖ Continue mediating and supporting openness agreements during post-adoption
 - ❖ Encourage birthmothers to seek out peer-support

References

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