Open Adoption: Trends From the Field

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Historical Perspective

• Adoptions Together founded in 1990 to welcome every child in need of a permanent family regardless of need of child. Licensed in Maryland, DC and Virginia.

• Non paternalistic organization designed to educate, guide, counsel, support and encourage adults to take charge of planning for children
Background of Agency

• 1990 to 2013 fully facilitated 3100 adoptions; 1300 local infant adoptions and 1800 international and US foster care adoptions; assisted with permanency for many more

• Full spectrum of attachment focused/trauma informed family support services (adoption expertise), training and educational programs

• Strong focus on permanency with a variety of partner programs with public agencies
Core Principles that Guide Our Practice

• The needs of children come first
• Openness and honesty is healthy for children and families.
• **Information is power**
• The best decisions are made by informed, thoughtful people
• Children deserve to be raised in stable, loving permanent families
• Adoption is a one time legal event with life long implications for all members of the triad
• Children need to maintain connections with their birth families and cultures even when they cannot be safely raised in their birth families.

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Basic Assumptions continued....

• Creating, strengthening and sustaining healthy relationships is essential for achieving permanency

• Post adoption support is critical!
What We Know

• The lens in which we see our clients impacts how they think about their situation

• By being continually open to learn, our practice has consistently evolved to meet the needs of those we serve
How is Open Adoption Defined?

• Full disclosure of identifying information between Birth and Adoptive parents.
• Continued in person contact as child matures
• Contact may be facilitated by agency staff or on their own

• A range of openness exists across a continuum. Each family system unique
Historical Context of our Work

- Adoptive Parents required to do yearly written updates to be available for Birth Parents

- Relationship one dimensional and some Adoptive Parents resented it

- Birth Parents who rejected post adoption contact were told that updates would be here.
Trends We Have Seen in the Area of Open Adoption

• In the early years we had a small portion of fully open adoptions and the majority of dyads exchanged letters and pictures.

• Of the fully open adoptions, most were with birth parents who chose adoption and were relatively stable.

• As children got older and had questions more families began calling to try and open their adoptions.
Trends (assumptions)

• Small numbers of birth parents initiating unplanned post adoption contact

• When Adoptive parents just disappeared we aggressively pursued. Over time we learned that family challenges were at the root (fear motivated)

• When Birth parents disappeared it felt less dramatic (we learned to take it more seriously and explore what was going on)
More Trends

• With more sophistication we facilitated open adoptions with parents who were less stable. Just added more support.

• For years we focused the openness education on the Adoptive Parents and helped them stretch

• Over time noted imbalance between what Adoptive and Birth Parents wanted in terms of openness

• Educating birth parents differently about open adoption increased frequency.
Power of words

• The language we use directly impacts the outcome – today all language is framed in context of relationship
Language of Relationship Based Open Adoption

• Your child’s extended family
• “Getting together” vs. “Visitation”
• Problem solving together rather than shutting down when conflict arises
• This is a new relationship and all parties may need support and guidance at developmental stages in relationship. Normalize challenges and be there with support
Four Notable Trends Impacting Open Adoption

• Laws regarding enforcement of post adoption agreements
• Social media has changed face of confidentiality
• Research findings have informed how we talk about open adoption
• Open adoption has moved from a fringe practice to mainstream. Movement from position of embracing a child’s birth family rather than erasing it. (paradigm of adoption shifting)
Laws Regarding Enforcement of Post Adoption Agreements

• Presently of the 50 states, 32 have laws that govern post adoption agreements.

• Only 25 states have language that makes contract legally enforceable.

• No remedies relate to the legality of the adoption and all take into consideration the best interest of the child.
Social Media (internet) has Changed Face of Adoption/Confidentiality

• Most of us turn to the internet as the primary source of info
• Geography no longer relevant
• We can find anyone and anything on the internet with limited info – facebook, etc.
• Children have access to the internet
• Communication can be instant – IMPULSE!!!
Research Findings have Informed how We Talk About Open Adoption

• Many studies reflect that the experience of open adoption is a positive for children, birth and adoptive parents
• Research is on the internet and easily accessible
• Enough longitudinal studies available to show benefits of open adoption – reached tipping point.
Open Adoption has Moved from a Fringe Practice to Mainstream

• Most agencies now promote open adoption as primary way to create an adoption plan
• Birth parents from all walks of life are considering the possibility
• Many child welfare agencies are using open adoption as a tool to mediate and prevent involuntary TPR. Builds on relationships developed during concurrent planning.
Open Adoption consistent with greater social trends of openness “out of the closet”

Act as if what you do makes a difference. It does.

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