Evolving Relationships and Contact in Adoptions

2013 Rudd Adoption Conference
April 12, 2013

9-10:15 a.m.
U. Mass Amherst Department of Psychology

Chair: Ruth G. McRoy, Ph.D.
Panelists: Erin Bigelow, Kathleen Cooley, Marvin Drake, Elizabeth Drake, & Phyllis Shepard
Overview of Presentation

- Brief review of the literature on birthparent decision making and post-placement experiences
- Birthparent/Adoptive Parent Panel Presentation
  - Erin Bigelow
  - Kathleen Cooley
  - Marvin Drake
  - Elizabeth Drake
  - Phyllis Shepard
- Questions/Discussion
- Concluding Remarks
It’s true. What will I do?
Unplanned Pregnancy:

- Decision making may be related to the following:
  - Age at time of conception
  - Relationship
  - Influences of family, church, community, school, friends
  - Future plans
- Options: abortion, parent or place for adoption
  - Influenced by parental pressure, family, relationship with birth father
Unplanned Pregnancy

- Emotional turmoil: regret, guilt, fear of others finding out; loss of relationship; fear of rejection

- In the past, due to secrecy: Birthmothers often sent to live in maternity home or with relatives
Decision: Adoption
After Placement

- Many birth mothers advised to return home, forget about the baby, and live “happily ever after.”
- Birth fathers were often viewed as “shadowy figures” (Mason, 1995).
- Only limited studies exist on outcomes for birth fathers—most of research is on adoptive families, adopted children, and birth mothers.
Birth Fathers and Their Adoption Experiences (Clapton, 2007)

- Selected findings from interviews with 30 birth fathers between 1996-1999.
  - Chief reason for placement: Parental pressure
  - Like birth mothers, birth fathers also often experience grief
Issues for Birth Fathers (Clapton & Coles, 2004)

- Often excluded from process of decision making
- Guilt—abandoned birth mother
- Loss or denial of existence of child
- Identity as birth father
- Emotional turmoil
- Feelings of emasculation or disempowerment
- Frequent loss of relationship with birth mother
- Parental pressure, guilt, depression; always on mind
- Rejection by family, friends
- Delayed acceptance of responsibility
- Over time—want to tell placed child their side of story
  - Missing part of self
Over time, birth fathers

- Remain conflict ridden (Deykin, Patti & Ryan, 1988)
- “Invisible Men of Adoption” (Gary Coles)
- Experience loss of child, parenting role, romantic relationship (Neil, 2006)
- Experience disenfranchised grief
- Think back on the experience when they become parents later in life
Birth Mothers

- Viewed as primary client
- Gatekeepers of information
- Devalued roles
- Stigma
- Ongoing loss
- Regret
Questions: Is my child alive? Does she know she’s adopted? Does he hate me? Is she being well cared for? Am I so terrible that I do not deserve answers to these questions? Does my adult child wish to make contact with me? Why am I not allowed to thank the adoptive parents? What will happen if I find the child I placed? Should I tell my spouse that I placed a child for adoption years ago? What will he/she think about me? Should I tell our children they have another brother or sister that I could not parent at the time?
Evolving Relationships: Panel Presentation

Erin Bigelow
Kathleen Cooley
Marvin Drake
Elizabeth Drake
Phyllis Shephard
Questions for Panelists

- Erin Bigelow
- Kathleen Cooley
- Marvin Drake
- Elizabeth Drake
- Phyllis Shepard
Implications for Research and Practice

- Need more studies on outcomes for birth fathers as well as birth mothers over time.

- Counselors/therapists need to be aware of the impact of placing a child for adoption as well as the impact of evolving relationships and varying types of contact for birth and adoptive family members.
Thanks to the Panelists!!!

- Thanks for sharing your stories!