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Plenary - Constructing Relationships: Contact in Domestic Infant Adoptions

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Constructing Relationships: Contact in Domestic Infant Adoptions

The seal of the University of Massachusetts Amherst is partially visible on the left side of the slide. It features a shield with a figure holding a bow and arrow, with a banner below it that reads "LIBERTATE QUIETEM". The shield is surrounded by a circular border containing the text "MASSACHUSETTS" at the top and "1780" at the bottom.

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Preview



Contact (openness) in domestic infant adoptions is about building relationships among intimate strangers who view contact to be in the best interest of the child.

The key adults must be able and willing to play their parts in order to make it work.

Preview



Strong positive relationships between adoptive and birth families can be very rewarding for all concerned and can support healthy development of the child.

The focus of this presentation will be on relationship dynamics, but other sessions in this conference will focus on child outcomes.

Background: Domestic Infant Adoptions

- About 14,000 per year in U.S. (fewer than 20% of adoptions)
- Typical reasons for placement
 - Feeling unable to raise a child at that time due to lack of economic resources, social support, or future prospects
 - Wanting a better future for child, especially in a 2-parent family
 - Not wanting to terminate the pregnancy
- Most common reason for adopting: infertility

Typical Current Placement Process

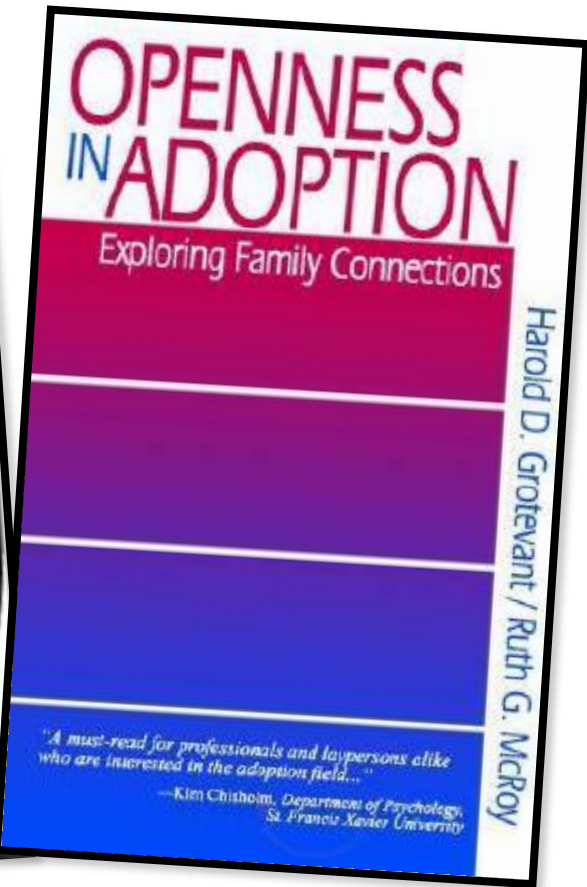
- Private agency or independent placement
- Expectant mother reviews profiles of prospective adopters
- May lead to meetings and/or interviews
- May lead to formulation of a contact agreement (may be informal or written; written may be legally enforceable)
- Birth parents' rights are terminated and transferred to adoptive parent(s).
- Contact arrangements are left in the hands of the birth and adoptive parents.

Initial Concerns: Is Contact Harmful?

Adopted children: confusion, leading to problems with identity, self-esteem, and adjustment

Adoptive parents: fear of intrusion, lack of control and entitlement to be the full parent

Birth parents: continual unresolved grief; inability to “get on with life”

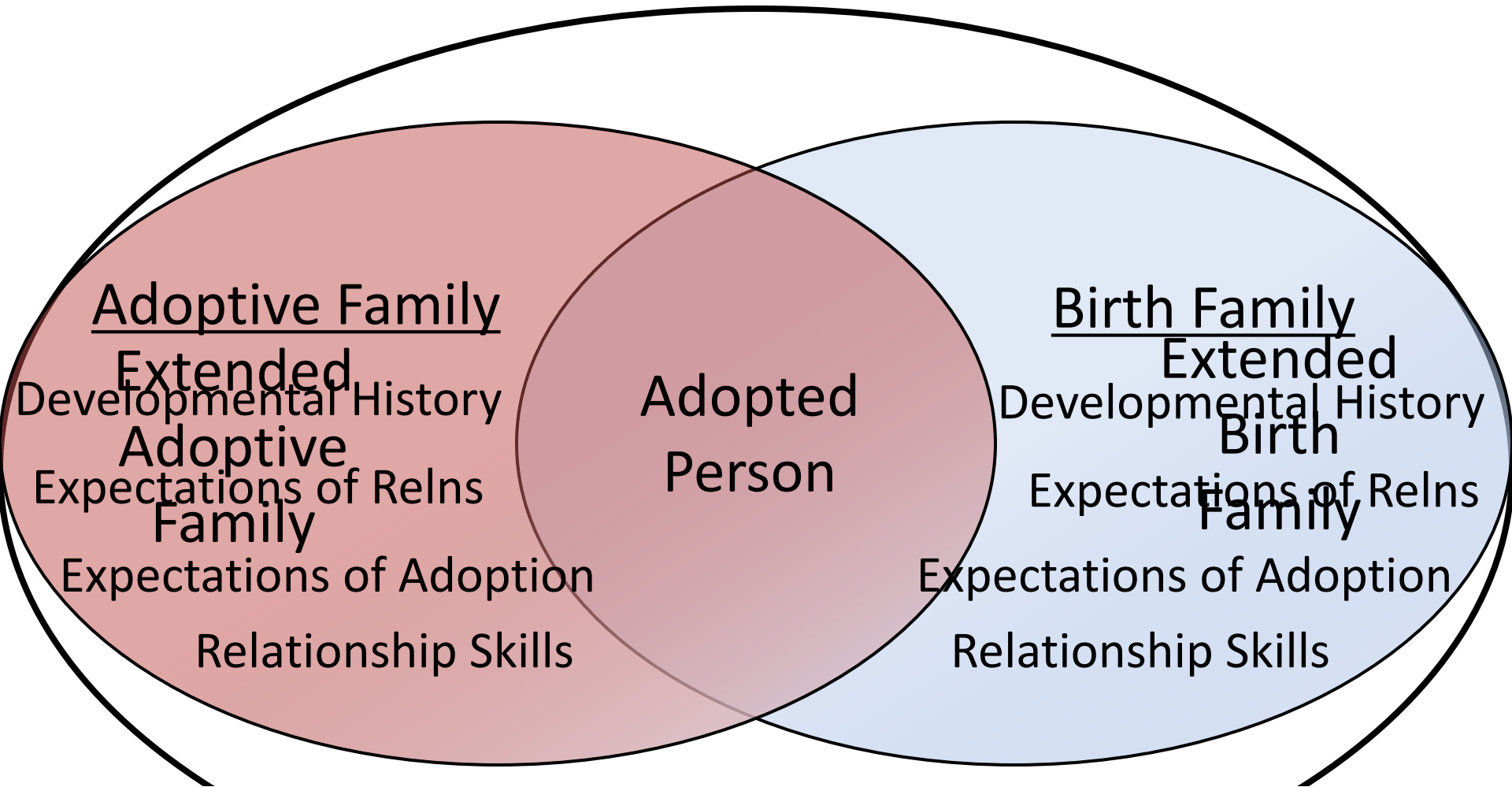


Things We Have Learned about Contact

- Contact can occur in many ways: through meetings, phone calls, exchange of pictures, gifts, letters, e-mails, Skype, instant messaging, Facebook, etc.
- Contact can involve different people.
- Contact can range from being rare to frequent.
- These will change over time.

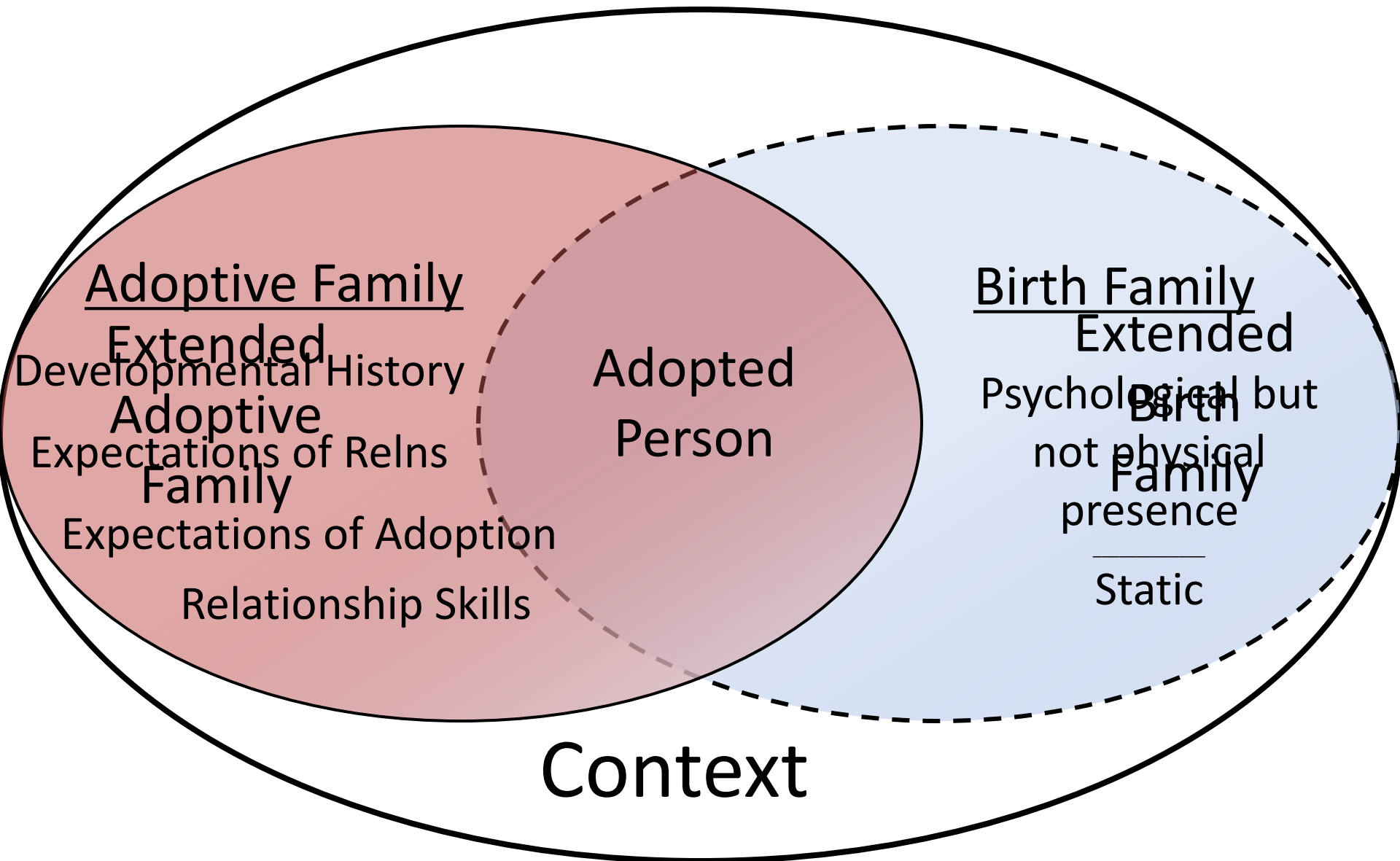
CONCEPTUALIZING CONTACT

Adoptive Kinship Network



Placing Agency, Traditions, Laws & Policies, Social Attitudes,
Cultural Understandings

No Contact



Adoptive Family

Extended

Developmental History

Adoptive

Expectations of Relns

Family

Expectations of Adoption

Relationship Skills

Adopted
Person

Birth Family

Extended

Psychological but

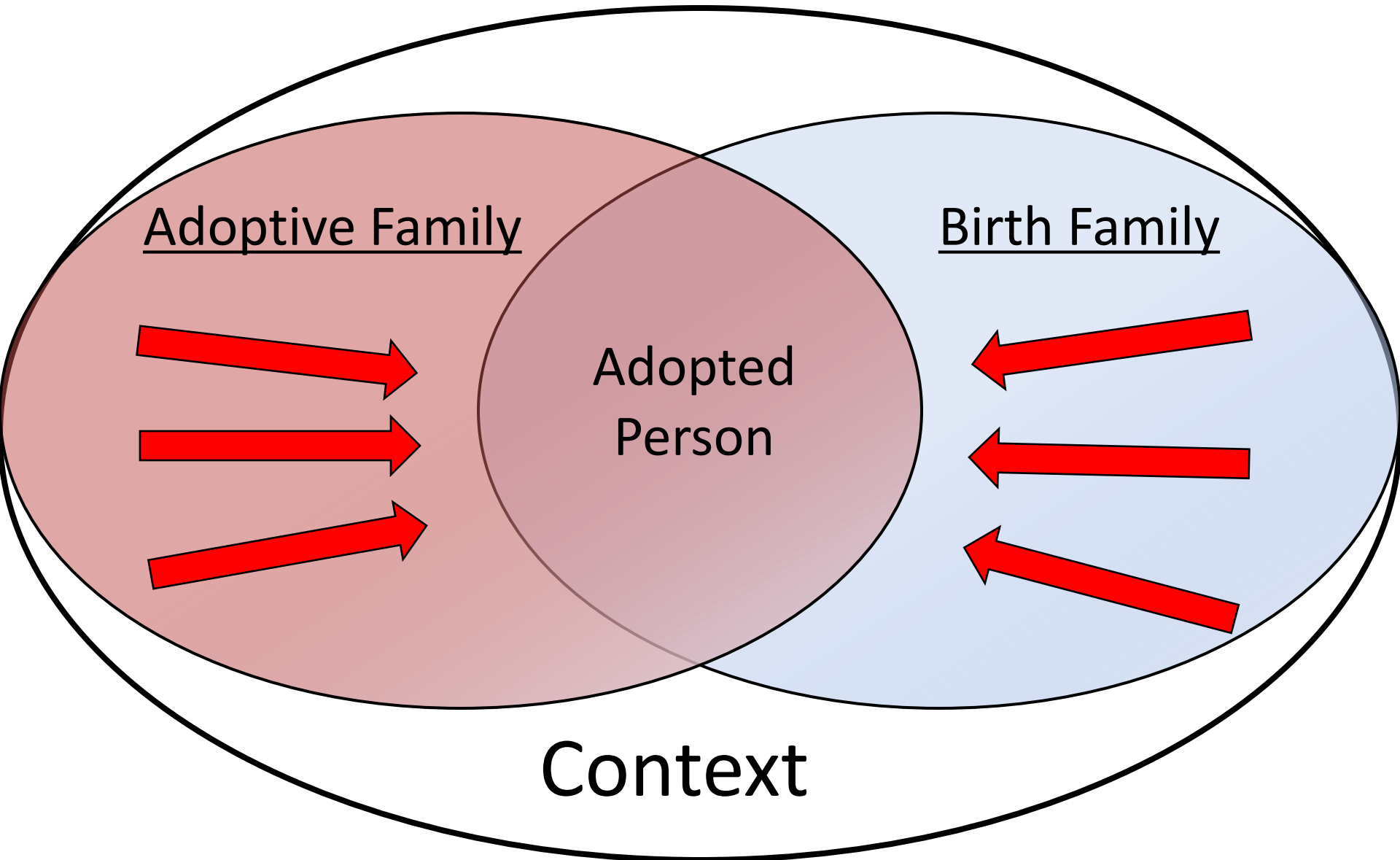
not physical

presence

Static

Context

Post-Adoption Contact



***HOW DO ADOPTIVE KINSHIP
NETWORKS
REGULATE EMOTIONAL DISTANCE
IN ORDER TO CREATE AND
MAINTAIN A SITUATION THAT
“WORKS”?***

Comfort Zone of Interaction

- Individuals have "range of tolerance for separation and connection - a comfort zone." (Farley)
- When forming the adoptive kinship network, differences in comfort contribute to a dynamic process involving connection and separation over time.
- Adoption often pulls adults out of their comfort zones.
- Ideal situation - mutually agreeable fit.
- Reality - like all families.

--Grotevant (2009)

One Adoptive Mother's View (no contact)

“I feel like my job is to protect my daughter and to do what is best for her and give her the most stable, normal life there is.... It's kind of like my goal that she would never feel any different or think of herself any differently than Joey [their older biological son]. ... I think this just gives such a level of normalcy, and of stability, and of unity, and cohesiveness that I am very quick to defend and very protective over.”

Another Adoptive Mother

(frequent contact)

“To me, I think that when you’re going into adoption you have to be willing to accept the fact that the biological parents are in the picture, and if they’re not in the picture you wouldn’t have a child. That’s just the bottom line, and to recognize that, and to recognize that they have rights too to know that their child is alive and well and healthy and being taken care of.”

Issues in Contact

- Disparities between birth & adoptive parents in age, education, & economic resources that reduce mutual understanding
- Mental and physical health – ability and willingness of key adults to make and keep commitments
- Can there be two mothers? What are their roles?
- Loss of control
- Extended family views and roles

Emotional Distance Regulation Begins Prior to Placement

Participants bring

- Developmental histories
- Expectations about relationships & adoption
- Relationship skills

These can be influenced by the preparation they receive at the agency

Typical Changes over the Life Course of the Adoptive Kinship Network

- Adoptive & birth parents may have contrasting desires for contact initially, and these may diverge over time.
- Increasing role of the child in contact decisions
- Birth mother's "watchful anticipation" of child's 18th birthday
- ... but "teenage things take over"

“Life Happens”: Non-normative Changes Require Continued Distance Regulation

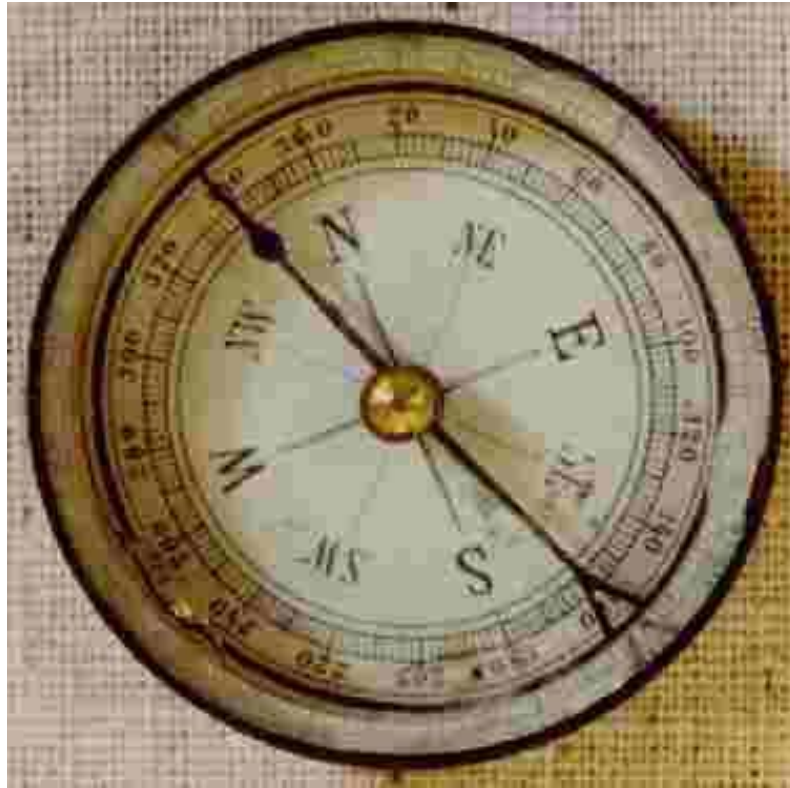
- Entrances and exits of AKN members
 - Adoption and birth of additional children
 - Adoptive parent divorces and deaths
 - Birth mother marriages and births
- Geographical moves

Mis-steps in the Dance Provide Opportunities for Growth

- Paradoxical relationship
- Boundary violations
- Inappropriate familiarity



Navigating Contact: What Makes It Work?



“We used to write daily and call each other weekly, I mean in the beginning. When the children were real little, it was tremendous intensity. And I think as our birthmother became more secure in herself and went on to finish college, her need to have to see them once a week or once a month became less and less. And you know, she feels more comfortable with us, we feel more comfortable with her, and we just know that we always have access... You just take it one day at a time. ***If you want it to work, you'll work at it.*** We feel it's healthy and want it to work because of our children.” (adoptive mother)

- Shift in thinking from nuclear family to adoptive kinship network
- Valuing of child's dual connection to birth and adoptive parents
- Engaged participation from birth and adoptive sides of the network
- Flexibility in day-to-day logistics
- Excellent communication skills
- **Commitment to the relationship – in the best interest of the child**

Thank you for your interest!

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