



Facilitated Openness Can Benefit Children Adopted from Care

from Spring 2007 *Adoptalk*

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- [News](#)
- [Parenting](#)
- [Policy](#)
- [Practice](#)
- [Recruiting Families](#)
- [Personal Stories](#)

Publications

Adoption Month

When my parents adopted in the early '60s, society accepted adoption, but it was not something most adoptive parents (whose infants were matched with the family by skin, eye, and hair color) shared publicly. Today, parents who adopt children from foster care cannot pretend their children were always a part of the family, and most know that becoming a legal part of a new family does not erase a foster child's emotional ties to the past. As openness in infant adoption gains currency, it is worth considering how facilitated, safe contact with birth family members can benefit children adopted from care.

Why Promote Contact?

Helping a foster or adopted child stay in contact with members of his birth family can be time-consuming and sometimes emotionally draining. Facilitated contact, however, can be valuable for children:

- **The promise of birth family contact can help some youth commit to adoption.** A recently published adolescent adoption study [1] found that before they would accept an adoption plan, “adolescents needed to be told early that adoption would not preclude contact with their birth families.” Youth also needed to clearly understand why they could not return to their birth parents, and why other family members could not assume custody. Once she realized her birth parents “weren't going to be there” for her, one youth in the study realized she belonged with her adoptive family.
- **Contact with birth family members and past caregivers can ease the transition to adoption.** As Nancy Umbach, an adoptive parent and professional in Ontario, asserts, “It is hard for kids to move on when they're still worrying about whether their birth family is okay or not.” Fortunately a new provincial law, effective December 2006, allows foster children to be adopted and, when it serves their best interests, have contact with members of their birth family, previous caregivers, or members of their band or native community. Prior to the change, any foster children whose birth families were granted the right to visit them could not be adopted.

Prior foster families or birth family members can even aid the transition to adoption by assuring the child that they love him and that being adopted is okay. These important people need to let the child know they do not view the change as an act of

disloyalty, but as an opportunity to be embraced.

- **By promoting contact with important figures from children's past, adoptive parents can show respect for their children.** Showing respect for a child's birth family (and, by extension, the child) is important. When children feel respected and know that their adoptive parents are not trying to sever ties to their past, they are better able to open up about their experiences, and start healing old wounds. As one parent in the adolescent adoption study affirmed, "I'm not sure adolescent adoptions can succeed if...the adoptive family is not willing to be at least open to some contact with the birth family."
- **Helping children face family realities is better than allowing children to fantasize about the unknown.** Faulty fantasies can grow when facts are absent. Realities, though they may be tough to handle, can be addressed and integrated into a child's understanding of himself. Barb Fischer, a child welfare trainer and foster, kinship, and adoptive parent, puts it this way, "My preference is that my kids are able to know the answers to some of their questions and are allowed to start adjusting to some of their truths while they are still young, instead of [being forced to]...go through it all at once when they are adults."
- **Keeping in touch can ease worries and promote the exchange of information.** Even if a child's birth parents are out of the picture, other members of the family or previous foster families may wonder and worry about the child. Contact with them can allow the child to see that other people still remember and care about her. Relatives and former foster families can also address the child's anxieties, help fill gaps in her history, and offer adoptive parents insight about past experiences.
- **Contact can help youth reconcile more pieces of their identity.** Questions of identity, particularly for teens adopted from foster care, can be deeply troubling. They were not born to their adoptive parents, so are they destined to replicate the missteps their birth parents may have made? Birth family members, neighbors, or past foster families may be able to address these concerns and share aspects of the family's history—talents, accomplishments, stories—that are easier for the youth to own.
- **Post-adoption contact can help birth family members accept and support the adoption.** In her study of parents who lost children to adoption, [2] Elsbeth Neil found that birth parents, burdened with feelings of shame and guilt, often required a great deal of emotional support. However, when adoptive parents initiated contact, indicated that the birth parents had value, and empathetically met with them face-to-face, adoption acceptance among birth parents rose substantially. As a result, they were able to be much more positive forces in their children's lives.

Facilitating Contact

When considering contact, adoptive parents must put their children's well-being first, and never force contact if the children are unwilling. With each interaction between her children and people from their past, Barb Fischer asks herself, "Whose best interest is served here?" The answer, says Barb, "has to be my child."

Whether they know the birth family or not, adoptive parents should work with the placing agency to make certain they receive copies of all the information from the child's file. Elements of the file can be incorporated into a lifebook for the child. The file might also include details about other members of the child's birth family or previous foster families.

Cheryle Roberts, program director for Lilliput Children's Services in California, suggests that workers might be able to moderate a pre-adoption meeting where foster/adoptive parents and birth relatives can share information about and pictures of the child. The worker could even take a picture of the birth and adoptive parents together. "What better way is there to make a child feel comfortable with the adoption than having a picture of his birth and adoptive families together in his lifebook?" asks Cheryle.

When considering contact resources, adoptive parents should cast a wide net. Parents and teens in the adolescent adoption study included the following as family: birth parents, step-parents, siblings, past foster siblings, godparents, fictive kin, grandparents, aunts and uncles, and other previous caregivers. Since sibling loss is often felt most acutely, it is not surprising that 73 percent of study families were in contact with siblings.

Promoting Safety

Lilliput Children's Services, reports Cheryle, likes to "promote openness as a continuum from no contact at all to open regular contact." Most families, she says, fall somewhere in the middle. After deciding upon contact, families must set parameters around the amount and kind of contact, the degree of supervision needed, and strategies for avoiding uncomfortable situations. Parents must also be prepared to help their children through any acting out that can result from contact. If any contact gets negative, parents should limit or stop it.

To help prevent problems, adoptive parents should instruct youth how to assess danger, extricate themselves from unhealthy situations, and address uncomfortable questions. One youth in the adolescent adoption study whose birth mother makes him feel guilty has a pat response: "I tell her that I love her and that there is a place in my heart for her, but I have moved on." Another youth reports, "I call my mom if I feel uncomfortable, and she will be right there." Just knowing her parents would not sanction contact with a drug-addicted uncle helped another youth leave her grandparents' house after her uncle showed up.

Although it can be difficult for adoptive parents to reach out to their

child's first family, many former foster children know and may someday seek out members of their birth family. When it is safe to do so, adoptive parents can help their children explore the past—and prepare for the future—by making or maintaining connections with birth families and former caregivers. These connections can help children and youth gain a better sense of who they are and more readily accept their place in the adoptive family.

[1] Lois Wright, Cynthia C. Flynn, and Wendy Welch, "Adolescent Adoption and the Birth Family," *Journal of Public Child Welfare* 1, no. 1 (2007): 35–63.

[2] Elsbeth Neil, "Coming to Terms with the Loss of a Child: The Feelings of Birth Parents and Grandparents about Adoption and Post-Adoption Contact," *Adoption Quarterly* 10, no. 1 (2006): 1–23.

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