

Living an Open Adoption

by Jennifer Ferrara

I am blessed to have a beautiful, healthy, smart, artistic and athletic son. Do I sound like a doting mother? I am a proud birth mother involved in a wonderful, open, cooperative adoption. Ten years ago I knew nothing about adoption. Now I am a living example that open adoption works...well.

Ten years ago, I was happily married. When I became pregnant, my husband went through personal turmoil. He chose to pursue his life without us. Abandoned and heartbroken, I found myself in a situation never imagined. As my pregnancy progressed and my husband vanished, I knew I had to start seriously thinking about lifelong decisions. I was a senior in college with dreams of becoming a teacher like both my parents. Having an education background, I was aware of the complications of single-parenting. This was not the "white picket fence" I so much wanted to offer my child. I contemplated and researched every option.

Let's look briefly at closed adoption. It fails. Adoptive parents live a lie, pretending about their child's basic history and ignoring information critical to their child's physical health and psychological well-being. Because of ignorance, adoptive parents like these live in fear. They think that birth parents will come back to reclaim their children and remove them as parents. The truth is that your adopted child will always love you for being his or her parents - and will feel another love toward his or her birth parents. No one can take either love away.

Adopted children can grow up feeling abandoned. Adopted people have the right to know who they are. Like all human beings, they should have the comfort of knowing their genealogy, ethnicity, health history, birth- and extended family. Sometime in their lives, all children question who they are-; this is especially true of adopted children. By denying them information, we create years of unanswered questions, fantasies and pain.

Birth parents go through life never knowing their child. They perpetually wonder where their children are, what they look like, who they've become as people and if they are still alive or not. Birth parents live with emptiness.

Closed adoption is a time bomb. Open adoption defuses most of these issues, enabling all parties to live in a healthy and happy way. I won't sugar-coat it by that the path is free from all personal struggle. Life is full of trials and tribulations. By at the least, in open adoption, fear can be alleviated, questions can be answered and curiosity cured. Open adoption is the most humane option. As adults, we - not our children - need to be the ones to carry the burden. We must do everything we can so that our children grow up emotionally stable. This principal objective entails work for both adoptive parents and birth parents. This means working together.

In open adoption, the parties basically agree to become one another's extended family. It's like a marriage: everyone becomes family. Families today are tremendously varied: traditional nuclear families, divorced families, stepparents, step- and half-siblings, single parents, multicultural families, second-generation (grandparent-parenting) and numerous extended family members. No matter which

kind of family occurs, the one thing they all have in common is children. There are never too many people to love our children.

Just as in our own families we have various degrees of communication and interaction, there are varying degrees of openness in adoption. Some families exchange letters and pictures; others have direct contact several times a year and some, like mine, are extremely cooperative. When I began my adoption investigation, open adoption sounded intriguing. I went through months of counseling (four years total and still involved in a cooperative-adoption self-help group). This was not a hasty decision. Thank God I had support from my friends and family as I sought out an adoptive family who would meet my expectations, and I theirs. I met a couple who could see through my eyes into my heart. Like me, Melanie and Jerry knew nothing about open adoption but felt it was right. During the final months of pregnancy, we went to counseling classes, Lamaze lessons and had barbecues. We bonded as friends, family and soon-to-be parents. We didn't know what the future entailed, but we promised to communicate always and to take it one step at a time.

Our family exists with our son, Jerick, at the center. Melanie and Jerry are his adoptive parents; they are the people who parent and raise him. Daily, they see him grow, feed, shelter and clothe him. They were the ones who watched him take his first steps and heard him speak his first words. They comfort him when he's hurt, go to every Little League game and Cub Scout meeting and attend parent conferences at school. He calls them Mom and Dad. My parents are grandpa and grandma, just as are theirs. They show off pictures, attend school chorus programs and spoil him. Our family has numerous aunts, uncles, cousins and even four great-grandparents (my grandparents). As for me, I am his birth mother. I was the person who loved him enough to give him life. His well-being came first in my life, and on that basis I placed him into the lives of all the rest of these people. Perhaps my role as a birth mother is not clearly defined, but I love him just as much if not more than does anyone else. I am an integral part of his life.... I am his Mommy Jennifer. Together, we are all Jerick's family.

Jerick has always known he was adopted. He understands it as well as a seven-year-old can, and to our surprise, at times understands even better than we think. His insight stems from our complete openness and honesty. We provide him with all of the pieces. He doesn't have to wonder who he looks like. He looks like me! "Where babies come from" is a popular topic for young children. One day, Jerick was playing with a friend. The little boy said, "I came out of my mom's tummy." Jerick said matter-of-factly, "I came out of Jennifer's tummy." He's completely content, because all his questions can be answered. He's never confused, because he has concrete facts. When Melanie and Jerry were spending time with another potential birth mother, he got jealous and said, "I want to call my birth mom." Jerick has wonderful parents and a beautiful baby brother, Christopher. Christopher's birth mom is not as involved with the extended family at this time. But as with many open adoptions, the door is always open for her. Christopher is a part of their family and so he becomes part of mine, too. Just as in any other family, it works. It really works!

We've had hardships along the way. At first, my father did not want anything to do with the adoption. Like so many adopting parents and birth families, he just wanted to shut the door and forget. But you don't. Adoption is a two-edged sword. On one side a family is thrilled and delighted to have this new addition to their family.

However, the other family is experiencing loss and grief-like a death. Open adoption allows both families to talk about and deal with the pain. My father was afraid that if he kindled a relationship with his grandson and then his adoptive parents changed their minds, he would have to deal with the loss and grief all over again. That is a risk. That could happen and sometimes does. But it happens in non-adoptive families all the time. When parents get divorced, sometimes family members do not get to see the children as often or ever again. We have to take this chance, though. More times than not, adoptive and birth parents honor their verbal commitments. Once my father took the first step, he realized their sincerity. He missed out on the first two years of knowing his grandson, and I thank God it was only two years instead of twenty. Today, Jerick loves his grandpa and knows no differently.

To build and strengthen our "family," we celebrate holidays together and have started some of our own traditions. At Christmas time, we have a brunch either at my mom's or their home (this year, it's at Melanie's). Everyone exchanges gifts. My mom lets Jerick and Christopher choose an ornament off her tree each year. For Mother's Day, we have a girl's day. My grandmother, mom, Melanie and I all go out for breakfast. On my birthday, I always receive flowers from my "adopted family." It's one of their ways to show me their love and appreciation. For Father's Day, my mom has the whole crew over for a lasagna dinner. It's the one time that Jerick can play with all his cousins from my side of the family. My favorite event is planning Jerick's birthday party each year. It's my special way of showing him how much I love him. I also take him to Knott's Berry Farm each summer. And we both love roller coasters! We went panning for gold last summer, and the miner asked Jerick if he was getting gold for his mommy. Jerick replied, "No, this is my birth mom." I'm thankful for what we've created. Besides being his birth mother, I am also his godmother. I have made a commitment to always be in his life. I have no fears or worries about the future. I know I'll always be someone special to him.

Jerick is coming to an age where he is beginning to question. He asked me, "Why doesn't my birth father ever come see me?" I told him something age-appropriate and gave him pictures of my former husband. This appeased his curiosity...for now. I'm glad I was there for him, and I look forward to when he is older so I can tell him the whole story.

It's only natural to strive to protect our young. But in closed adoptions, we harm instead of protect. Children can understand and handle the truth. And later, as adults, they appreciate the honesty. I wish I had never had to place my son in adoption. To this day, I cringe when I hear ignorance speak: "How can birth parents give their children away?" I didn't "give away" my son. Like all birth mothers regardless of the reason, I was unable to parent my son, so I "placed" him in adoption - an open, cooperative adoption. I chose his parents and they chose me. "Gave away" sounds heartless and frivolous. On the contrary, it was the hardest decision in my life, and the most selfless act a person can make. Adoption is never a first choice; it's a last one. I still cry because I wish I could have been the mother I wanted to be. But I smile a lot, too, because I helped complete a family.

Few women ever dream that she will have to adopt her children or have to place her child into adoption. Adoption, for both women, is usually the last resource after exhausting every other possible avenue. However, open adoption can be a wonderful way of life for adoptive parents, the children and the birth family. Open adoption helps families heal and survive. An adoptive mother will never feel her baby growing inside her womb. She may

never know the labor of childbirth or experience the miracle of creating life. A birth mother will miss out on the joys of motherhood. She won't be there to rock her baby to sleep on her bosom or sing him lullabies. She may never hear her name called...Mommy. So instead of parting from one another, these two strong and courageous women can seek out one another. Maybe instead of living with a lack in their lives, they both can gain. What a powerful bond occurs when we women unite! Don't underestimate the permanency that exists in motherhood. We belong together, adoptive mothers and birth mothers, because a mother's love is best of all.

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