

Speaking of Birthmothers

by **Marta Barton & Beth Hall**

Five years ago, our lives changed forever. We both became mothers. Our sons, born only one month apart, are both adopted. One of us, Marta, is a birth mother; the other, Beth, is an adoptive mother. Throughout the past five years, we have been able to share our different experiences and concerns without the pressure of being the adoptive parent and the birth parent to the same son. This has given us the freedom to be honest with and supportive of one another without having to worry about boundaries. We share more similarities than differences with regard to our own losses and those we anticipate our sons will experience.

From our discussions, we have developed this list of things we hate to hear adoptive families say about birth parents. I could never place a child for adoption, but anyone who does is a real a real saint.

(Marta) As a birth parent, I certainly do not feel like a saint for not parenting my own flesh and blood. After placing a child for adoption, many of us struggle to get back on track. We don't plan an adoption until we are pregnant. It's easy to say "I would never do it." But once you are faced with an unplanned pregnancy, there are few choices and adoption may seem like a very attractive option.

Our birth parent...

(Beth) Adopted people must bear the burden of losing one family to gain another, experiencing a loss of control and self-determination. It essential for adoptive parents not to take over their children's story as if it were their own. Fundamental damage can be inflicted upon children when they are not given the opportunity to learn, to make decisions, or to speak for themselves as they grow older. Don't make it harder by claiming their story as your own. African American women don't place children for adoption.

(Marta) As an African American birth parent and adoption counselor, I can attest that African American women do place children for adoption. The truth remains, however, that many African American women have limited places to go for adoption assistance or support. The majority of available adoption services do not facilitate women of color because of the intense secrecy they may require. Loss of secrecy is a primary barrier for African American women considering adoption. The fear of being shunned by peers, families, and community ranks high, so many choose to do adoptions cloaked in secrecy. The African American community is not very willing to hear about adoption. Many argue that African American children should stay within the family, even if it means having the child raised or adopted by someone within the family. Often this is not an option, or may not be the best alternative for the child.

Our child never brings up his birth parents, so neither do we ...

(Beth) My son also never brings up questions about how to make friends, how to treat other children, or how to cross the street safely. Parents need to teach their children and give them the information necessary to understand themselves and their world. Children need not just to be taught to cross the street safely and treat others with respect. They also need to be told about their birth parents. We often hear people say that the introduction of a second set of parents may cause confusion for the child. But studies show that genetic heritage does influence people. The only controversy is how much. As parents, we have to help our children feet connected to

their heritage. Just as with crossing the street, it's the right thing to do. But suppose we reject the notion of a child's fundamental right to know their full heritage - do we believe that they will never hear about adoption and birth parents if we don't bring them up? No; this belief is naive. Rather than leaving them to cope on their own, we need to broach the subject occasionally and give them opportunities to receive our guidance and approval. When we read books about adoption, or when we talk about our children's birth parents, or when birth parents spend time with our family, my son carefully watches. He never asks. He never requests. But he always notices. And later in the sandbox, I sometimes overhear him describe his own birth parents or how he was born, and if I don't detect pride, I at least know that he has his own story and is discovering how he feels about it. I'll keep in touch for the birth mother's sake, but I don't want to confuse my child.

(Marta) Confusion usually starts at an adult level. If the parent feels confused about contact with the birth parents, then the children will certainly pick up on those feelings. Adoption is confusing - our children have two sets of parents and two heritages. We cannot protect our children from this confusion, but we can give them the skills to deal with all of the complicated realities of being adopted. Children are very matter-of-fact. They will understand information presented in a simple, straight-forward manner. Maintaining contact with the child's birth family should be for the child's sake. We focus on our child's birth country, so he will feel connected.

(Beth) It is wonderful to give a child as much information and connection as possible to the country of his or her birth, but some adoptive parents prefer a connection to a country rather than to people because it's less threatening and challenging to their position as the child's parents. Many adult adopted people describe wondering as children whether they were born (separate from having been adopted), since no one ever spoke of their actual birth. It is important for us as adoptive parents to look at our motivation. If we are only talking about the birth country because we don't want to talk about birth parents, then our children will likely sense this discomfort and be hesitant to express their true feelings. In the long run, they will look to us for approval of their natural feelings of curiosity and sadness. These feelings are not a reflection of our parenting or love for them; they are normal responses to the reality of being adopted from another country. Children who grow up with a positive image of their birth parents are more likely to have positive self-esteem. We made an agreement. We kept our part; it isn't fair that she want to change her mind.

(Marta) No relationship, not even adoption, can be set in stone. Birth parents experience many changes over the course of the adoption process. They may come to a point where the pain is not so consuming, and they may want to establish a relationship with the adoptive family or child. Most experience feelings of grief, loss, and guilt. The emotional stress of placing a child for adoption is often so overwhelming that the need to sever contact may be necessary for a while. Oftentimes, a birth parent will come back to re-establish contact after a period of time. It's been five years since I placed my son for adoption and our relationship continues to evolve. At times, the contact is difficult for me; other times I thrive on spending time with him. When I first placed him for adoption, I lived 400 miles away. Now I live just 50 miles away. But now that I am also parenting my 15-month-old son, it is difficult to find time to spend with my adopted son. He calls and asks me when am I going to visit him. Of course I jump at the earliest possible date. I dread the day when he is angry with me for placing him for adoption, the day he tells me he hates me, and the day he doesn't want to see me. These things may never

happen, but I need to keep them somewhere deep in my mind, because relationships do evolve and change - for better or for worse.

You only have one "real" mother. After all, she gave you up.

(Beth) Comments like this can only be damaging. Every adopted person has two real sets of parents, both of whom give him or her love and life in different ways. The term "real" tends to convey a critical judgment, as if only the "real" parents matter. In the end, adopted children come to understand that they have come from their birth parents. If a child's adoptive parents cannot talk positively about the birth parents, the child will eventually see the negative comments as a reflection on himself or herself. He or she may even begin to take action to fulfill the societal expectation (and perhaps the adoptive parent's fear) of possessing the negative aspects or qualities of the birth parent(s). just as you want respect and courtesy from the birth parents, you must show respect for and courtesy toward them. This will go along way in demonstrating and modeling what is it to be a "real" parent. It is foolish to imagine that, because she places a child for adoption, a birth mother has no rights to connection to the child. The connection we all have to our birth parents exists stems from our genetic heritage, not from their actions. The words "gave you up" implies that the birth parent abandoned or discarded the child. This is hardly ever the case, even with birth parents who are ill-prepared to parent and who have their children forcibly removed from their custody.

Your birth mother.. (Marta)

... was too poor to keep you.

This sounds like a value judgment that is placed on the birth parent. Most often being poor is associated with not having any money. Think about how your child will interpret your response: 'If one day we don't have any money, we won't be able to keep you.' A child may be better able to understand, 'She was struggling financially, and couldn't afford to take care of herself and a new baby.'

... was too young to keep you.

In some situations, age may be the reason for placement. Maybe a teenager wants to parent her child but she is being financially supported by her parents and they are not willing to support her child as well. Age is often a small piece to a much larger puzzle.

... couldn't keep you.

This will most always spark another question, 'Why couldn't she keep me?' I've asked my son's parents to refer my son to me when he asks them, 'Why didn't Marta keep me?' so I can explain my reasons to him. Of course, as his parents, they need to tell him his adoption story, but only I can tell him how I was feeling at the time. I was afraid at the thought of being a Mommy. I wasn't ready. I was afraid to be a single parent. I was afraid of what my family might think if I told them I was pregnant.

... had so much love for you she decided to place you.

Adoptive parents love their adopted children, so does this mean you will place your adopted child for adoption? I am always turned off when I hear people say this, particularly when I hear birth parents say, 'I did it out of love.' This sounds like an easy answer to a very difficult and complex question. Of course I love my son, but I feel that love shouldn't be associated with the reasons I chose not to parent him. I find it hard to believe that one places a child because of love alone. The decision to place my son for adoption was based on what I felt was best for him and me at that crucial time in my life. I felt that I wasn't capable of providing him with the life he needed - the life I had always envisioned my children having.

... didn't want you.

This answer is purely negative and is non-explanatory. If a birth mother does not want to parent her child, there is a reason beyond this. Abandonment issues are automatically present in adopted children. This kind of statement doesn't help to reassure a child of his or her place in an adoptive family; it only hinders. I don't want to know anything about them. If my child wants to search, that's her choice.

(Beth)

When my daughter was born, my husband and I rushed to meet her. When she was just three hours old, I held her for the first time. I bathed her little face with my tears, never wanting to let her go. When the hospital social worker told us that Ana (her birth mother) was having a hard time and that it would be best for us to leave the hospital without letting her see the baby again, I was secretly relieved. I coveted this child; I wanted her for mine. When we got home with our most precious gift, I did not feel like her mother. I felt like a thief. I still blush with shame at my need to serve myself rather than giving Ana back some small measure of the enormous gift that she gave us. I decided to fly back with Sophia to see Ana before she signed the documents that would make Sophia our legal child forever. Looking back, I think it may have been the smartest thing I have ever done. I remember people saying I would lose the baby. "She gave her up. Leave it alone. Why can't you just enjoy being a mother?" But as I watched the two of them spend time together, I saw Ana's joy and grief intertwine. Funny, at the time I thought I was doing it all for Sophia and Ana. In the end, I think I gained the most - for it was on that day that I truly became a mother. If you are fearful of your child's birth parents or feel they don't really matter, maybe it makes sense to explore your own sense of legitimacy as a parent. All of us have to face a society that believes "blood is thicker than water." This makes us, as adoptive parents, more susceptible to self doubt and uncertainty. But the truth is our strongest ally. Our love for our children, for all that they are - which includes the legacy that they bring from their birth parents - is the strongest cement for long-term family connection.

Reprinted by permission from Adoptive Families July/August 1996.