
Risks and Benefits of Open Adoption

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Abstract

Open adoption has both strong critics and staunch supporters. Most of the criticism and support is based on the philosophical or legal rights of members of the adoption triangle, but empirical evidence to support either position is sparse. This article reviews the arguments for and against openness, and the empirical evidence that supports or refutes these arguments.

Research to date indicates that birthmothers commonly view open adoption positively. However, teenage birthmothers often are not developmentally ready to assess the long-term consequences of openness, and may be overdependent on the adoptive parents and immature in their contacts. Adoptive parents are generally favorable toward openness, but many feel that they were pressured to accept it in order to obtain a child. Many adoptive parents state that they are uncertain about what the future may hold in open adoption. The effect of open adoption on the children is least understood at present and demands further long-term research.

The choice of open adoption should be made in the course of comprehensive counseling of birthparents and adoptive parents by trained professionals. Continued contact should exist only if ongoing support through postadoption services is extended to all parties, with particular attention to the interests of the children.

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Adoption practice in the United States has undergone a dramatic evolution in the past 30 years and continues to change radically. On one hand, postponed childbearing among two-career couples, changes in participation of women in the labor force, and a rising incidence of infertility have led to an increase in the number of couples and individuals seeking to adopt babies. On the other hand, birth control and abortion practices and societal acceptance of single motherhood have contributed to a sharp decrease in the number of healthy infants available for adoption. At the same time, the push to find permanent homes for foster children has resulted in an increased number of adoptable children with histories of maltreatment. (See the articles by Sokoloff and Stolley in this journal issue.) These changes in the adoption population have been accompanied by concomitant shifts in adoption practice. One of the most controversial shifts is the introduction of open adoption as standard practice among many adoption agencies and attorneys.

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Definition of Open Adoption

Open adoption refers to the sharing of information and/or contacts between the adoptive and biological parents of an adopted child, before and/or after the placement of the child, and perhaps continuing for the life of the child. Open adoption is in direct opposition to the traditional confidential adoption practices of the recent past, where birthparents often did not know the identity of the adoptive parents and could not maintain any contact with the child or the adoptive family after placement. Until very recently, adopted children when reaching adulthood had no way of finding their biological parents. Today adoption professionals are generally supportive of giving adoptees access to records holding details of their genealogical and biological past and information necessary to pursue reunion with their biological parents if they have made known their availability for contact.^{1,2}

As the number of infants in adoption has decreased over the past three decades, the influence and control of birthparents in the adoption process has increased dramatically.

This push for open records and adoptees' rights to information has been joined by a call for increased openness from the beginning of the placement, allowing birthparents to have continuing access to their child from the time the child is placed for adoption throughout the child's life. The call for continuing access is based on two distinct developments in adoption practice. First, many professionals have expressed a concern about adoptees' heightened identity confusion in adolescence arising from the secrecy attached to information about the past and have advocated openness as a way of ameliorating this confusion. Second, continuing contact is more common because the decreasing availability of adoptable infants has bolstered the involvement of the birthmother in adoption decision making and practice. As the number of infants in adoption has decreased over the past three decades, the influence and control of

birthparents in the adoption process has increased dramatically. In independent adoptions, which have flourished in the recent past, attorneys and agencies have strengthened the role of the birthmother in the adoption process, allowing her to participate in the selection of the adoptive parents and supporting requests that she be allowed continuing access to the adopted child.

Thus, there is great variation in open adoption today. Adoptions can be open prior to placement, for a set period of time after placement, or for the duration of the child's life. Openness can involve a sharing of identifiable or nonidentifiable information during the preplacement period, a meeting of both sets of parents, and agreements concerning ongoing contact and/or sharing of information after adoption. Biological and adoptive parents are asked to specify at the beginning of the adoptive process how open they wish that adoption to be. Sorich and Siebert recommend matching adoptive and biological families partly on the basis of their choice of open, semiopen, or closed adoption.³

Although some have proposed frameworks to determine the extent of openness and categories of open adoptions,^{3,4} researchers are finding that these frameworks must be very fluid, fluctuating along a continuum of openness.^{5,6} Adoptive family relationships, like all family relationships, are constantly changing, and open arrangements will evolve and develop as the child and the families grow.

Open adoption arrangements are informally practiced in the United States, and there is usually no legal contract filed with the court for an open adoption.⁷ This process has both strong critics and staunch supporters. Most of the criticism and support is based on the philosophical or legal rights of members of the adoption triangle, and empirical evidence to support either position is sparse. This article first describes the arguments for and against openness and then reviews empirical research that supports or refutes these hypotheses.

Postulated Benefits of Open Adoption

Open Adoption May Preclude Adoptive Parents' Maladaptive Beliefs

Traditional, or closed, adoptions, where little or no information about the biologi-

cal parents is shared with the adoptive family, are said to create many problems by their secrecy. They decrease adoptive parents' sense of control over the adoption because the agency controls the flow of information.⁸ Problems in the adoption itself can be blamed on genetics or on the biological parents' unknown lineage,⁹ and secrecy contributes to the denial by adoptive families that they are in any way different from biological families.^{9,10} Openness precludes the secrecy that encourages these maladaptive beliefs. Adoptive parents' understanding of, and positive relationship with, birthparents should increase empathy toward the birthparents of the adopted child and reduce denial of the child's biological heritage.

Open Adoption May Diminish Birthmothers' Separation Grief

Counselors to birthmothers have postulated that these women experience extended loss and grief following the placement of children for adoption.¹¹ Open adoption gives biological parents more control over the adoption decision by providing information about the adoptive parents who will be receiving their child. Having this information enables the birthparents to imagine or visualize the family environment in which their child will live and may relieve some of the guilt and uncertainty that accompany relinquishing a child.¹² The counseling process throughout the preparations for open

adoption is thought to facilitate the biological parents' grieving and their decision making about the adoption itself.^{13,14}

Also, the ability to have some continuing knowledge about a relinquished child may encourage birthparents to choose adoption,¹⁵ thereby increasing the number of children available and decreasing the wait for an adoptable child. In a very general way, therefore, openness may benefit prospective adoptive parents by increasing the pool of adoptable infants.

Open Adoption May Prevent the Adoptees' Identity Confusion

Professionals have long postulated that confidential adoptions contribute to greater identity confusion for adoptees in adolescence.^{9,16,17} In addition, a 1973 study of 70 adults who were searching for their birthparents found a correlation between search and low self-esteem (although the research could not determine whether searching was a result of low self-esteem or whether low self-esteem was a result of the need to search).¹⁸ Adoptees are also reported to be high users of mental health services, particularly in adolescence, for emotional disturbance and identity problems.¹⁹⁻²¹ Adoption professionals further hypothesize that the secrecy resulting from altered birth certificates and sealed adoption records contributes to adoptees' curiosity and confusion about their past and that a negative image of the birthparent, which persists because of secrecy, may

interfere with a positive identity formation in the adoptee.²²

Open adoption precludes the adoptees' need to search for their biological parents in adolescence, a process termed "outreach" by Spencer.²³ Outreach has been characterized as an adaptive effort to complete the chain that stretches from the present into the remote past,²⁴ either as a

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move toward healing the early pain of separation²⁵ or as a result of the adoptee's need for "an internal sense of human connectedness."²⁶ Lack of information about heritage has been linked to problems with both individual adjustment and adoptive family problems.^{18,27}

Some professionals believe that early openness will prevent psychological maladjustment. If children have access to their birthparents, they can obtain answers to questions about their identity or their biological roots as those questions arise, rather than in retrospect once they reach adulthood. If biological parents are known and available, they may not be idealized or villainized by the child, but seen as real people who are a part of the child's past and present.

For children who are adopted when older and who know and remember their birthparents, continuing contact with their birthparents may be especially appropriate. The relationship between older adopted children and their adoptive parents has been compared to that of stepfamilies.²⁸ They are individuals with a past history in another family and the ideas and beliefs about family life that history has spawned. If adoptive parents avoid dealing with their children's history, they are denying those children a part of their identity. Open adoptions that acknowledge an older child's history and preadoptive genealogy should therefore support a more complete identity development.

Adjustment issues are particularly salient for adoptees in adolescence, as they experience numerous physical and psy-

chological changes and wrestle with identity. Berman and Bufferd propose that the adoptee in a confidential adoption does not have the "biological reference points" that her nonadopted peer has and is unable to compare her physical development and maturation with that of her biological mother.²⁹

Open adoption may also benefit adoptees by increasing their circle of supportive adults. Hajal and Rosenberg apply the concept of "metafamily" from the remarriage literature^{30,31} to the open adoption families. The adopted child in this circumstance has a larger-than-average extended family, resulting in a variety of relationships. Adopted children who are in direct contact with biological parents throughout childhood may indeed treat them as aunts or uncles or other extended family members.³²⁻³⁴

Postulated Risks of Open Adoption

Open Adoption May Aggravate Adoptive Parents' Insecurity

Many childless adoptive parents begin adoption with doubts about their ability to parent, to which is added concern about the permanence of adoption. Berman and Bufferd state that adoptive parents, as a normal part of family development, face the question of their entitlement to the adopted child during the first stages of an adoptive placement.²⁹ Open adoption may exacerbate uncertainty. Hajal and Rosenberg characterize the early stages of adoption as a time of "uncertainty and insecurity . . . mourning the loss of their wish for a biological family."³⁰ Wondering whether the biological parents will change their mind can inhibit healthy bonding with the newly adopted child.³⁵

Open Adoption May Prolong Separation Grief and Lead to Overdependence in Birthparents

Cocozzelli warns that the potential benefits of open adoption may persuade some adolescent mothers who would not otherwise have done so to relinquish a child.³⁶ Those mothers who relinquish in the expectation of continued contact may risk prolonged uncertainty and grief. Indeed, adoption professionals who work with biological mothers caution that open adoptions which include continued contact prevent closure on the biological mother's loss in having given up the child and may

interfere with the developmental task of grieving for the relinquished child.³⁷ The attachment between a biological mother and the adopted child as a result of ongoing contact may create ambivalence and confusion for the biological mother instead of easing her guilty feelings. This

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possibility led to language in a Connecticut statute distinguishing between visitation and custody and warning that the visiting party (the biological parents) should not perceive themselves as replacing the adoptive parents, either temporarily or permanently.³⁸

Open adoption may also carry the additional burden of dependency of the biological parent. Silber and Dorner equate the biological parents to extended family members in that they are relatives of the child.³⁴ Many biological parents are young adolescents who may look to the adoptive parents as surrogate parents, putting an added strain on them.³⁹

Open Adoption May Confuse Adoptees

The biggest risk of open adoption postulated by most adoption professionals is that it will interfere with the process of bonding between adoptive parents and child, which in turn will interfere with the adopted child's healthy development and adjustment.^{35,37,40,41}

Adoptees in confidential adoptions wrestle with the fantasy of "ghost" parents,⁴² but shared information or direct contact with these parents may exacerbate rather than eliminate these fantasies. Furthermore, Byrd postulates that a young child is not equipped to deal with the differing value systems of two sets of parents and may reject both value systems, increasing the risk of psychopathology.⁴⁰ Thus, instead of helping to resolve identity conflicts in adolescence, contact with

birthparents may increase an adoptee's confusion.⁴³

In the few court cases discussing visitation between adopted children and biological parents, courts have usually assumed that visiting would "confuse the child and result in harm rather than good" (*In re Catala*, 1977, cited in Nathan, 1984, p. 649).³⁸ Adoption professionals generally agree that the child will be least confused about loyalties to either parents when the open relationship between the adoptive and biological parents is clear and positive.³²

Empirical Research on Open Adoptions

Most research concerning the effects of open adoption consists of cross-sectional studies of small samples of adoptive parents; some samples also include birthparents. This research is complicated and limited because, as in most family research, each open arrangement is unique and constantly changing.^{5,6,44} Research to date provides some information about how birth and adoptive parents experience openness, but little is known about the actual impact of openness on family relationships, children's behavior, or psychological adjustment.

Relinquishment by Birthmothers

Studies have found that some birthmothers are more willing to relinquish their children for adoption when they can receive information about the adoptive parents or maintain some form of contact after relinquishment. This is the situation even among the African-American community, where formal adoption is not widely practiced. Sandven and Resnick report that their study of 54 African-American teenage single mothers found that 22% said that "if they had had some control in choosing the adoptive family, they would have been more interested in this option [open adoption]."⁴⁵ Barth also found that availability of openness options was related to the decision to relinquish in his study of teenage mothers.¹⁵ Kallen and colleagues found a clear concern among teenage mothers who kept their children that adoption would prevent them from knowing about the children as they grew up.⁴⁶ Their comparisons of teens who parented children with those who placed their children with others found that the decision to place the child is not related to

a concern about the well-being of the child, but is usually a more self-related concern about their own ability to know about the child. Given the developmental status of adolescence in regard to altruism versus self-concern and the difficulty for teens to think through the long-term consequences of behavior, this finding is not surprising.

Acceptance of Status as Adoptive Parents

Regarding family adjustment, several studies have found that adoptive parents often chose open adoption because they felt it was in the best interests of the child.^{47,48} Those adoptive parents having more extensive contact with birthparents tend to show more understanding of them,⁴⁹ and open adoptions in many studies have been characterized by a positive relationship between the adoptive parents and the birthparents.⁴⁷⁻⁴⁹

In older-child adoptions, preplacement openness is very typical, particularly when foster parents are adopting an older child. Foster parents support and facilitate visiting between children and their biological parents in the hope of achieving reunification, so there is often substantial contact and information shared during foster placement. Meezan and Shireman's study of foster parent adoptions found

that 62% of the foster parents had met a member of the biological family.⁴⁹ Contact with the biological parents was associated with foster parents' subsequent decision to adopt, either because of resentment of the biological parents and concern about the child's future with them, or because of the foster parents' understanding of the biological parents and acceptance of the child's heritage. Those with more extensive contacts with the biological parents tended to show more understanding of them. Although the

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decision to adopt a foster child seemed to be most influenced by a negative feeling about the biological parents, the practice of continuing contact after the adoption, although rare, was characterized by a positive relationship between the two sets of parents.

Adoptive parents in open adoptions have cited the advantages of the security of knowing about the birthmother's health and personality.^{5,44,47,50} Siegel's interviews with 21 adoptive couples found that many were comforted by specific knowledge of characteristics of the birthmother. Belbas's study of 12 adoptive couples also reported that they appreciated having the contact with birthmothers to answer questions as they arose.⁴⁷ Berry's survey of 1,396 adoptive families in California found that families in open adoptions reported having more information about a variety of aspects of the child's birth and medical history.⁵ Berry also found that, in independent adoptions, adoptive parents who had met the birthparent prior to adoption were significantly more likely than those not meeting a birthparent to feel well prepared for the adoption.

Security About the Adoptive Relationship

In an in-depth study of adoptive parents in 12 open adoptions, Belbas found a relationship between adoptive parents' feelings of entitlement to the child and the degree of openness (ranging from letter writing to face-to-face contact) of the adoption.⁴⁷ The more frequent and direct the contact, the less the adoptive parents worried about being the child's real parents or about feeling entitled to the child. Parents who had letter-only contact worried most about the biological parents wanting to take the child back. All families in the study had adopted at least 3 years earlier, and many had adopted more than once. All children in this sample had been adopted before the age of 3 months.

Belbas also found that adoptive fathers in the minimum contact group were more resistant to contact than adoptive mothers, but that the response from a biological parent usually reduced the general fears of either adoptive parent. Adoptive parents usually did not talk to friends and family about the openness decision until after this decision had been made. Friends and family members who were consulted were often negative about openness and suggested severing all ties with the biological parents. The adoptive parents in fully open adoptions had been personally chosen by the biological mother to adopt the child, so they often felt reassured about a positive relationship between themselves and the biological mother.

McRoy and colleagues,^{48,51} in interviews in 17 open adoptions, also found that the more open the adoption, the more comfortable adoptive parents were about their entitlement to the child. It is unclear from these cross-sectional studies, however, whether openness contributes to a sense of entitlement or vice versa.

Grief and Overdependence in Biological Parents

Hanson interviewed a small nonrandom sample of 28 teenage mothers, comparing those who kept their children and those who relinquished them for adoption, and found that, in general, the latter had more negative scores on questions concerning their roles as parents or children, indicating some confusion about whether they were a parent or a child.⁵² However, those in open adoptions had an even higher risk of role confusion than those in closed adoptions. In a mailed survey of 59 relinquishing birthmothers,⁵³ 18 in open adoptions and 41 in confidential adoptions, researchers found that birthmothers in

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open adoptions were significantly more troubled than those in closed adoptions regarding social isolation, somatic complaints, physical symptoms, despair, and dependency. They concluded that birthmothers in open adoptions did experience more prolonged grief and dependency than those in closed adoptions.

McRoy and Grotevant found that, while adoptive parents in open adoptions were generally satisfied with the amount of contact they practiced, biological mothers generally wanted more, regardless of how much contact they practiced.⁵¹ Adoptive parents in direct contact with birthmothers expressed some concern about the maturity of biological mothers and about the amount of time and energy that contact with them demanded, but felt that openness was in the best interests of the children. Biological mothers often treated the adoptive family as an extended family

or a source of social support. Although contact did create some pain for the biological mothers in McRoy's study, the benefit of knowing about the child and the reassurance that they had made the right choice was often seen by the biological mothers as worth the pain.

Adoptive parents in other studies have also complained about the overdependence of birthmothers.^{5,44} Some adoptive parents have noted that, while the openness agreement was for a limited time after placement, birthmothers continue to call, and calls were often related to their own needs for money and advice, rather than to the child's welfare.⁴⁴

Competition and Control

Barth and Berry's study⁵⁴ of 120 older-child adoptions and a more recent study⁵ of 1,396 infant and older-child adoptions found that adoptive parents' comfort with contact is related to their perceptions of

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control over the contact. In 79% of the adoptions studied, there was contact between the children and former caregivers; 42% of the children had contact with foster parents, 27% had contact with biological parents, 32% had contact with biological siblings, and 27% had contact with other relatives. Only 38% of the adoptive parents thought these contacts were helpful, but 77% of the parents who found the contacts helpful were those who also had complete control over the contacts. Conversely, the more control the adoptive parents had, the less open was the adoption. Those who did not find the openness helpful at all (28%) said they had no control over the contacts.

Berry found that the key predictor of adoptive parents' comfort with open adoption was that these parents had planned for openness from the beginning of the placement.⁵⁰ Other important predictors of comfort were: the child's absence of a history of maltreatment, the birthmother's higher level of education, the directness of contact, the adoptive mother's older age, and the fact that the

adoptive parents had talked with the birthparents prior to placement.

Nelson's study of 120 older-child adoptions found that 20% of the children maintained contact with a biological relative, usually the mother.⁵⁵ Contact occurred infrequently, usually once every 2 months. Of those adoptive parents whose child was in contact with a relative, 50% were glad that the child had that contact, but 34% were ambivalent, and 9% wished the child did not have that contact. Partridge and colleagues found that 14% of the disruptions in their study of older-child adoptions were blamed by the adoptive parents on the ongoing relationship between the children and their biological parents.⁵⁶

Regarding infant adoptions, most adoptive parents in Belbas's study said that they at first felt openness was demanded rather than offered by the adoption agency and that they believed refusing would jeopardize their chances of adopting.⁴⁷ These adoptive parents regarded continued contact, however, as a benefit to either the biological parents or the child. Siegal also reports that many of her nonrandom sample of 21 adoptive couples said that they agreed to an open adoption despite misgivings because of the unavailability of closed adoptions.⁴⁴ When asked about the disadvantages of open adoption, uncertainty about the future was a common response among this sample, a finding corroborated by Berry's sample of 1,396 adoptions.⁵⁰

Adoptees' Fears, Confusion, and Adjustment

Brodzinsky and colleagues interviewed 100 adopted children and found that it is not until 8 to 11 years of age that children begin to understand that being adopted is different.⁵⁷ It is also at this time that adopted children begin to feel tenuous about their family status and acknowledge a concern that the biological parents may somehow come to claim them. By the age of 11 or so, these fears are usually allayed, and children once again feel more certain about their place in the adoptive family. True understanding of adoption and its legal ramifications is not attained until adolescence. These findings suggest that openness and contact before adolescence should be handled with great care and with assurance to the children about the permanency of their place within the adoptive family.

In the California study of 120 older-child adoptions,⁵⁴ adoption workers planned for contact in 54% of cases, and plans were usually for contact between the child and his or her biological siblings. Planned or not, when any contact did occur, workers usually reported that it weakened the relationship between the children and their adoptive parents, even though those children in open adoptions were significantly less likely to display extreme behavior problems such as aggression or hyperactivity. This was a subjective assessment on the part of adoption workers, and they were not asked to elaborate on how the relationship was weakened or how they arrived at their judgment.

In the larger California study of 1,396 adoptions of children from infants to 16-year-olds, Berry found that children in open adoptions had significantly better behavior scores (as rated by their adoptive parents) than children in adoptions with no access to birthparents and that the adoptive parents of children who were in contact with birthparents had more positive impressions of those birthparents. However, because this is a cross-sectional survey, it is unknown whether adoptive parents in open adoptions rated their children's behavior more positively because of those positive impressions of the birthparents, whether parents were in open adoptions precisely because of those positive impressions, or whether open adoption is truly related to more positive behavior in children.

McRoy and Grotevant's qualitative findings show varied interpretations among adopted children; some embrace contact and some are frightened or confused by it. These researchers do not identify an age-appropriate time for contact or other correlates of adaptation.⁶

Conclusion

This review indicates that open adoption is often viewed positively by birthmothers, who perceive the benefit of knowing about the adoptive family and the child as he or she grows up. Research also suggests that adolescent birthmothers are not usually developmentally ready to assess the long-term costs of openness, but only consider the short-term benefits. Adoptive parents often note that birthmothers are overly dependent and immature in their contacts in an open adoption.

Research on adoptive parents finds that parents in open adoptions are generally favorable toward openness. Increasingly, research is indicating that a key correlate of adoptive parents' comfort with openness is a sense of control over contacts. When adoptive parents are surprised by the incidence, frequency, or duration of postplacement contact, they express more discomfort and dissatisfaction with openness.

The child's interpretation of any contact or relationship with biological parents in an open adoption is at the center of the debate over the benefit of continued access, and it is precisely this interpretation that is yet to be illuminated by research.

Surveys do suggest that many adoptive parents feel pressured to agree to an open arrangement in order to receive a child. Many in open adoptions also state that they are uncertain about what the future in open adoption may hold. However, those in open adoptions do feel entitled to the child, and most have a generally positive impression of the birthparents and are positive about openness, saying that they feel it is in the best interests of the child.

Research is beginning to contribute to an adequate picture of the practice of open adoption, but much more rigorous research is needed to understand the effects of openness on children and families. The child's interpretation of any contact or relationship with biological parents in an open adoption is at the center of the debate over the benefits of continued access, and it is precisely this interpretation that is yet to be illuminated by research. Although openness and information sharing may prevent the genealogical bewilderment and pain of searching in adulthood, research studies to date have not found a temporal relationship between openness and subsequent adjustment. McRoy and Grotevant have found mixed reactions to openness in their interviews with children and have yet to identify key correlates of comfort or amelioration of "bewilderment."⁶

Given the present state of knowledge, decision making around open adoption remains a risky business, with substantial need for caution, assessment, and planning. The primary need is for further research, particularly longitudinal research, to help determine whether and how openness contributes to stronger adoptive families and healthier adopted individuals. Several large-scale longitudinal studies of adoption are currently in progress, including one by McRoy and Grotevant in Texas and Minnesota, and another by Barth and Berry in California. The Texas/Minnesota study should provide detailed information about the experience of openness by all adoptive family members, while the California study should provide substantial information about a variety of factors that contribute to adjustment among adoptive families and how openness contributes to adjustment.

The Role of the Fathers

Recent research suggests the importance of the feelings and perceptions of adoptive fathers to the stability of an adoptive placement.⁵⁸ Although most research has asked only one parent about the adoption, research questioning adoptive parents individually has begun to identify significant differences in how mothers and fathers feel about adoption and about openness.^{47,58} Westhues and Cohen find that dissatisfaction of the adoptive father is related to adoption disruption. Coupled with Belbas's finding that adoptive fathers

are more hesitant about openness, this finding suggests the need for further research about the role of adoptive fathers in adoption outcomes and in open adoptions. These findings also imply the need for adoption practitioners to assess and involve the adoptive father in decisions about open adoption.

More research is also needed about the role of birthfathers in open adoptions. A recent survey of adult adoptees in Canada found that, while many adoptees were interested in meeting or getting information about their birthmothers, the majority (77%) felt indifferent toward their birthfathers.²² Additional research is finding that birthfathers are not typically involved in the decision to place a child for adoption, but are often influential in the adolescent mother's decision to keep the child.⁵⁹

There is also a need for more research concerning the role of birthgrandmothers in the choice and practice of open adoption. Kallen and colleagues⁴⁶ and others have found that the mothers of birthmothers have an influential role in a teenagers' decisions to place children for adoption, both in the Anglo community^{60,61} and in the African-American community.⁴⁵ Anecdotal evidence from the California Long-range Adoption Study also indicates that birthgrandparents often remain in contact with the adoptee when birthparents have stopped contact.⁶²

Continued Contact Must Exist in a System of Continuing Support

Given this research to date and because of the importance of honesty in family relationships and the need to enlist birthmothers in making positive and responsible plans for their children, continued access between birthparents and their adopted children should be available and supported. It is the social and legal responsibility of adoption agencies and attorneys, however, to balance the rights and responsibilities among the parties—the birthparents, the adoptive parents, and the adopted child—and to support each of these parties during the decision-making process and after a decision has been made.

The adoption attorney or social worker has the societal mandate to protect the interests of vulnerable parties in working with more powerful parties. With birthparents' rights and interests most likely to be heard, given the supply and demand characteristics of the current adoption market, it is the adoption worker's responsibility to support the best interests of the child. Any policy regarding adoption practice should consider the short- and long-term impacts such a practice will have on the adopted child. Because empirical evidence about the long-term effects of open adoption is scarce, adoption practitioners' work is made more difficult.

Professionals generally agree that the child is least confused about loyalties to either parents when the open relationship between the adoptive and biological parents is clear and positive. Adoption attorneys and social workers must help birth and adoptive parents identify their beliefs and expectations about contact and devise an agreeable plan for contact, respecting the adoptive parents' rights as the functioning and legal parent. Although adoption professionals have always emphasized that the choice of any open adoption be made in the course of extensive counseling with trained professionals, the extent to which this occurs in independent adoptions is unknown. Lack of counseling is a potential source of later disagreement and conflict among the parties. Some independent agents state that they help to

guide the relationship between biological and adoptive parents at the beginning of the adoption, then step out of the way as both sets of parents start to form their own relationship. However, the child's interests must be the paramount concern of adoption counselors, and relinquishment of control to the birth and adoptive parents over such a new practice is disturbing.

Lack of counseling is a potential source of later disagreement and conflict among the parties.

It is important that birthparents interested in continued access have a commitment to a lifelong plan, however limited or extensive that plan is. Birthparents are typically adolescents who may not understand or comprehend the long-term consequences or implications of such choices. If contact is planned and regular at first, but then drops off or unexpectedly stops (when the birthparent gets married or begins a new life), this can be a second separation or source of confusion for the child.

In this changing era of adoption practices, those birthparents who desire openness will and should continue to have access to their children throughout the child's life. That access brings with it, however, new challenges for every member of the "adoption rectangle"¹: the birthparents, adoptive parents, adopted child, and adoption agency. Birthparents must recognize the lifelong commitment they are making to the adopted child, adoptive parents must acknowledge the role of the birthparent as an extended family member (but not a primary parent), the child must be supported in working out the unique relationships of these various family members in his or her environment, and the adoption agency must provide lifelong supportive postadoption services for all parties as they forge these new relationships.

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