

# Director's Corner

## The Balancing Act

# Talking with Extended Family and Friends

by Julie Randolph and Beth Hall

It takes conscious thought and preparation – as well as a bit of tact – to help friends and family learn how to be supportive of your adoption plans, as well as to help them understand when things they say or do are not supportive.

Often when beginning the adoption process, pre-adoptive parents are asked questions or given advice by people who may or may not have accurate information about adoption but are eager to offer their opinions, solicited or not. This can lead to challenges: first deciding who to tell what as the process goes forward and second finding ways to be sure that the information and advice you are getting is accurate and helpful.

Most of us do not choose adoption without thought and preparation – preparation friends and family do not get. We spend many agonizing hours, months and sometimes years deciding whether we will be good enough parents to our child and whether we really can love someone intimately who is not genetically connected to us. Will we be competent as an adoptive parent? Will we really feel like a parent to a child we haven't given birth to? We would not dream of suggesting that anyone should become an adoptive parent without this self-scrutiny. Yet most of us ask our extended family and friends to accept our adoption plan without question! We announce our decision to adopt and are confused and hurt if family and friends don't fully or immediately embrace our choice.

Extended family members and friends can forge relationships with our children that can be among the most supportive and important they have. They have an intimate view of our lives and can offer incredible insight and understanding to our children without being in the charged role of "parent." Giving them time and opportunity to know and understand our children and their experiences is well worth the effort for both our children and the important people in our lives.

**Responding to Questions About Your Child's Adoption: Privacy vs. Secrecy** Secrecy is usually associated with things that are either shameful or "bad" – things to be hidden or minimized. Research has demonstrated that secrets in families can be lethal because they undermine trust and security in relationships. Yet conventional wisdom says that

adoptive families are somehow second best and that adoption is something to hide or minimize. The state creates birth certificates that falsify the birth of the child by removing the birth parents and pretending the adoptive parents are the only parents the child has. Fortunately, most adoptive parents don't agree that adoption should be kept hidden, but they may overcompensate by becoming too open in talking about their family's adoption experiences. While secrecy is harmful, we should not forget that privacy is important.

We all exercise privacy in daily life. We would be offended and most likely refuse to answer if someone asked about our sex life or toilet habits in a public setting. Yet people often ask inappropriate questions about adoption or our children's birth parents or birth history, and often adoptive parents feel that they "should" provide answers. Adoptive parents have a responsibility to protect the privacy of their family and children without being embarrassed about doing so. Take a look at the questions in the boxes below. We've taken some questions people typically ask of adoptive parents, and translated them into similar questions that would be asked about giving birth instead of about adoption. (See the above table).

Seen in this light, these questions are clearly inappropriate. Adoptive parents don't serve themselves or their children by answering them.

### Adoption

1. Are you sure you want to adopt? It seems so expensive and hard to accomplish.
2. Oh, so you are working with a birth mother... why is she giving up her baby? What is wrong with her? Why doesn't she keep the baby? Is she getting any money? Is she poor?
3. Did the baby's birth parents do drugs?
4. Who got the birth mother pregnant?
5. How did the baby's birth parents get pregnant? Why did she get pregnant?

### Birth

1. Are you sure you want to have children? They seem so expensive and so much work.
2. Oh, so you use contraception... why are you doing that? Why don't you want a baby? What's wrong with you? Don't you like children? Can't you afford a child?
3. Did you take any drugs while you were pregnant?
4. Who got you pregnant?
5. Tell me all about your baby's conception! Did you get pregnant on purpose?

It is important to think ahead to what it might mean to your child later in life if you have discussed an issue in your child's history that might create bias or concern in others. You have to assume that information you share with others is likely to come back to your child somehow. Nobody wants their child to hear from the neighbor kid that they have three other siblings who were removed from their birth mother because she was abusing them or that their child's birth mother didn't know who the child's father was because she had slept with more than one person. Such details are part of your child's private story. He or she deserves to be in charge of the decision to share them with others.

### Responding to Offensive Remarks About Adoption

Remember, most people have not had the benefit of the education that you have had, so they are likely to be filled with the myths and misconceptions about adoption that are perpetrated by the media and society at large. People who truly care about you will want to keep you from harm. To them you should respond with care and respect. Those who are simply practicing voyeuristic curiosity can be dealt with by finding a polite way to simply stop the conversation.

Sometimes you can challenge an offensive remark immediately, if you feel that a discussion will be more helpful than hurtful. You do this by gently asking simple questions. "What do you mean by that?" "Why did you say that?" "Why do you feel that way?" This approach gives the other person a chance to describe how her views were formed. You can then point out that those views are not acceptable to you. Emphasis is on the fact that your attitudes are different and you would like to discuss the issue again when you or they have gathered more information. This approach makes clear that you take the issue seriously enough to want to prove your point with them.

Find allies within your friendship or family group with whom you can talk about differing adoption attitudes the first moment you are alone after the remarks are made. Clearly state your objections. Stress that you still care about the person who has made the offensive remark but that you believe her attitudes about adoption are wrong. Having an ally will help you and the ally will have the opportunity to feel like an insider to your adoption experience which will likely result in them being closer and more invested in your family long term. Sometimes, a remark is so offensive that you want to make clear that neither you nor your child needs to hear it. Don't let the offender say it. Interrupt her midstream and say, "I won't let things like that be said in my presence." She may be speaking out of conversational habit, because no one ever made clear that such remarks were unacceptable.

Prepare your children in advance. Think about attitudes you think a particular relative or friend holds and most importantly where you think the attitude came from. Explaining to your child why and how attitudes are formed can help foster understanding of other points of view, even those with which we don't agree. By extension, this models tolerance, which is what we ourselves are usually hoping for. State clearly why you do not agree and give your child permission to challenge remarks in an appropriate manner.

### Consider a Letter – Tell Loved Ones What You Need

Sometimes it is hard to tell family and friends what we need from them. Consider writing a letter to communicate what you want them to know and save them the embarrassment of doing something you later tell them was the 'wrong thing to

do." They will often welcome clear direction and information in a written form where they can have their first reaction out of the public eye and your scrutiny. Most adoptive parents have taken some time to come to terms with adjustments or losses in the process of adopting. Family and friends deserve the same time and freedom to let go of their own assumption and biases as they adjust to the new make up of your coming family. Fran & Tom Coughlin sent the following letter along with their holiday update to most of their family and friends. Use it as an example of approaches to try.

*Dear Family and Friends,*

*As most of you know we have been trying to start our family for the past three years. All the medical interventions have proved fruitless so we have turned to adoption as the most realistic way to start our family. Throughout this last year we have researched and spoken with others about adoption. It seems as complicated as the infertility process but we are determined to move ahead and are excited at the prospect of having our dream fulfilled. We are writing you because we feel it is important to have our friends and family both knowledgeable and supportive of us.*

*Our decision*

*Tom and I have decided to adopt in the US rather than go overseas, for example to China. Foreign adoptions tend to be expensive and often do not include family information. Newborns are not as available. With a domestic adoption we will have access to important medical/social histories. We will also know the birth mother and perhaps the birth father.*

*Two types of adoptions occur in our state: 1) A private or independent adoption where the birth parents select the adopting parents and place the child at birth (usually) directly with them. A lawyer handles the legal aspects of transferring custody from the birth parent to the adopting parent. 2) In an agency-assisted adoption, the birth parent selects the adopting parent the newborn is relinquished to the legal custody of an agency. The agency places the baby in the home of the adopting family. Both forms of adoption require home studies, extensive counseling of both parties and a completion of the adoption before a judge usually within the first 6 months of birth.*

*If you are wondering...yes, this is all scary to us especially in light of recent news stories. The many "experts" seem to feel that long drawn out legal battles should not occur with proper counseling.*

*The birth mother or father can change their mind within a certain time period. This usually occurs (if at all) during the first few days after birth. We have not selected the "path", (agency or independent) and will do so once we are in a specific plan. Each state has its own laws that make all this the more complicated. We are told in 5% of the adoptions nationwide, birth parents change their minds.*

*We try not to dwell on the possibility of a reclaim and hope you will do the same. We have great advisors and are members of a support group. We've been to workshops, are reading books, and generally getting drenched in the whole subject. For your information, yes we are tired of yet another subject we need to conquer before we can finally start our family.*

*Our support group wonders what's going to happen when we all suddenly have these infants to care for. We're not convinced it comes naturally! Nothing has been simple so far and we look for support from all our friends, siblings and parents who have had children by adoption or birth. And to those friends who do not have kids we look for empathy when we call up and say..."What have we done?"*

*Open Adoption*

*An open adoption means both parties have met, selected each other, grown to know about each other, and often have some form of contact following the adoption. Commonly this is an exchange of letters and pictures once a year. This may increase to phone calls and/or visits depending on the comfort level of all parties. We are agreeable to an "open adoption" and feel it will be best for our child. An excellent book that can answer many questions you have is *The Open Adoption Experience* by Melina & Roszia. On the subject of books, another good one is *Adoption Is a Family Affair! What Relatives and Friends Must Know* by Patricia Irwin Johnston. It's small, inexpensive and easy to read.*

*Pact offers continuing support to their birth families and adopting families. They offer educational classes, networking, social gatherings, a sponsor family, and professionals who will always be there to answer questions. We encourage you to call or write Pact to learn more about them. You can also become a member of Pact and get information and articles about adoption or a catalog free of multicultural and adoption books for children and adults. Hint: Great presents for Tom, Fran, or baby.*

*Well we could write a book but will stop for now. Please keep us in your thoughts. Oh yes...true to form, Fran has already got the frame for a jogging stroller and Tom has his eyes on a toddler computer. That should be all we need, right?*

*Fran & Tom Coughlin (now parents to Will & Ben!)*

It is crucial for pre-adoptive parents to try to anticipate and understand the deep emotions that will confront them during the placement process. The romantic picture of adoption – a child needs a family, a family needs a child, and fate brings them together for the rest of their lives – is just one part of the story. In childbirth, women often half-jokingly remark that their memory of labor and delivery begins to fade over time, which is a good thing, because if they remembered all the details they'd never have another child! Adoptive parents who have completed the process often have a similar experience – they focus on the beauty of having a child, not on the roller coaster ride that they were on before their child came to them. But being aware of and prepared for the twists and turns of the ride before you step on it is important for you and for your child to come.

The process of adopting a child evokes strong feelings for everyone involved – including the extended family members of adoptive parents, adopted people, and birth parents. It is rare that someone who announces, “We’re thinking about adopting a child” gets a neutral response. Many questions and concerns come from friends, family and even mere acquaintances. Even after you come to terms with your own fears, other people in your life may well bring them up again and again. Scary failed adoption stories, and warnings about the problems “those children” will have will come up from people who want to help, to make sure you “understand what you’re getting into” or from people who for some reason enjoy sharing horror stories. (Think of all those cringing pregnant parents-to-be who are subjected to terrifying labor and delivery stories!) Other people’s questions and pronouncements will evoke reactions– maybe anger at the audacity of strangers or perhaps doubt about your own decision. Being prepared to field these questions in the best way you can will certainly help.