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Fine Tuning Openness Tools for Managing Relationships Between Birth and Adoptive Families

Adapted from Adele Jones remarks at Pact's 2004 Spring Training

As open adoption continues to evolve as a norm in adoption practice, it seems participants and practitioners are becoming better schooled in the basics. In our practice, we have discovered ways to maximize the benefits and contribute to viable, healthy relationships between adoptive and birth families. There are three factors which are important in "fine tuning" these open relationships: (1) good matching decisions, (2) setting and maintaining appropriate boundaries, and (3) learning concrete communication skills.

Matching Decisions Based on Interpersonal Relationship **Goals and Comfort** The matching process in open adoption usually begins with expectant parents looking at "profiles." "letters," or "books" assembled by prospective adoption parents in an attempt to give some insight into their lifestyle and background. Rarely is there a clear idea – either defined by the adopters or understood by the expectant parents – of the couples understanding and desire for how the open adoption will be practiced in the future. Too often, definitions of "terms of relationship" and "connectedness" mean different things to different members of the triad. These factors are often determined by the family culture in which we are raised. Family culture is not defined only by ethnicity or geography, but also by idiosyncratic family traditions such as gift giving or holiday celebrations. When we begin any new relationship and meet our new partner's or meet our new friend's family, we begin to notice the way they interact that may differ or be similar to our own familial interaction.

For example, during her first meeting with the prospective adoptive parents, an expectant parent was assured she would be considered part of their extended family. She asked if she could visit at Christmas and the couple answered, "Of course!" In early December, with the baby now almost sixmonths-old, she called to tell the adoptive parents her flight schedule, indicating she would arrive on Christmas Eve. For her, the meaning of "extended family" was getting together for the actual holiday. Yet, for the adoptive parents, their understanding of 'visiting at Christmas' simply meant, around the holidays, not on the holiday. This misunderstanding had the potential to throw their relationship into major crisis, but it was really just the result of different assumptions about language and terminology.

In adoption, we too often ask prospective birth and adoptive parents to discuss lifestyle and health histories, but we don't encourage them to share their values or explore the compatibility of their lifestyles or cultures. Sometimes there will not be time for such luxuries, but when there is, why not work to encourage the discussion to address the kind of issues that typically arise in these relationships? Think about your marriage, partnership or other intimate friendships. How many awkward situations, miscommunications or family feuds might have been avoided if the time was taken to discuss and clarify personal expectations. Why wait to find yourself in crisis, needing to negotiate boundaries or reacting to problems or discomfort?

Some issues that we suggest exploring include:

- Gift giving traditions (an overabundance of loot vs. a more restrained approach)
- Family celebrations (everybody and anybody is invited vs. an intimate members-only atmosphere)
- Family visit expectations (dropping by vs. planning ahead)
- Plans (showing up just before or right on time vs. arriving in the general vicinity – sometimes within an hour or several - of the agreed upon time)
- Spontaneous, drop-by people vs. "I need a little notice", "I need to put you on my calendar" people
- What are the most important values in our family? (honesty, hard work, compassion, support)
- How affection is expressed or was expressed (words, physically demonstrative, what people did for one another)
- How was anger handled? (was it okay to express anger? Yelling? Slamming doors?)
- What were the things we couldn't talk about in our families? (money, sex, emotional issues, family problems, etc.)

Even if your family cultures and values turn out to be very different, by discussing and understanding them, both families are much more likely to be flexible when it comes to behaviors they understand versus those they interpret only through their own lens. In the above example, the birth mother's family always celebrated major holidays with every possible relative in attendance. On the other hand, the adoptive family celebrated Christmas as a month long series

of get-togethers with important people in their lives and limited actual Christmas day to only their immediate family. Once each parent understood one another's expectations, they realized either was trying to be inappropriate and they were able to reach a compromise.

Respecting Boundaries Means Supporting One Another In Their Unique Role The second factor that affects open adoption relationships is the ability of birth and adoptive parents and families to establish their own boundaries and observe them. By definition, adoption is about loss and the accompanying emotions that go with it tend to blur or even obliterate good boundaries unless we are vigilant and careful. False assumptions of who is responsible for the birth parents' grief often cause adoptive parents to feel guilty and then hesitate or struggle to set healthy boundaries. Birth parents, who may not be clear about a particular adoptive family's boundary expectations, can cross them without even realizing they are doing so, and adoptive parents may feel sense of entitlement that may not consider a birth parents life circumstances.

A birth couple was invited to spend the weekend with the adoptive parents of a three year old. The couple does not live together although they do continue to be in a relationship. When they arrive for the visit, it is clear they expect to share a bedroom. The adoptive parents have two other children, 9 and 13 years old, which makes them feel it is impossible for them to have the unmarried birth parents sleeping together in their home. Practically before the visit has begun, both sides are placed in the uncomfortable position of having very different expectations and judgments about one another's choices — leading to the real possibility of a disaster that will disrupt their ongoing relationship.

Definition, explanation and discussion of boundaries in relationships in advance will help address and avoid issues like this. We often use vignettes in both individual, group education and counseling, asking clients to read scenarios and offer opinions about the boundaries being set, crossed or ignored and to come up with suggestions how to handle each situation. Because the roles being played by the participants in an open adoption relationship are unique and lacking in readily available models, open adoption participants often learn how to find their own roles by trial and error. Supporting one another often means helping one another to understand each other's entitlement issues – adoptive parents needing to believe they are the child's real parent in order to grow into their parenting role and birth parents needing to believe they are important and essential to the child's well being, despite having to relinquish the parenting role.

In the above example, the two sets of parents could have discussed their hopes for connection and their concerns for the other children in the family. Once it was pointed out to the birth couple, they realized that they had been using the visits as an opportunity to nurture their own relationship by having time together. They realized that they needed to separate their own needs from that of their birth child and the other children in the family. The adoptive parents had to let go of their judgment about an unmarried couple sleeping together, at least enough to recognize that without such a liaison their youngest child would not be in their lives. This gave them some needed impetus to begin to discuss sexuality and relationship decision-making with their older children.

Communication Means Listening With Understanding

Finally, open adoption requires good communication skills. We try to schedule check-up meetings early in relationships, to help adoptive parents, birth parents and other extended family members evaluate their relationships and voice concerns in a safe and facilitated environment. We believe that by giving clients the opportunity to practice communicating on what are often difficult topics, they will be able to continue to do so without us. Techniques common to mediation sessions include: opportunities for each party to describe the problem without interruptions; clarification of meaning and sharing the impact of decisions; and the creation of workable solutions.

An adoptive couple and a birth mother came together during a check in meeting to discuss their relationship. They had reached an impasse regarding the name given to the birth mother in the adoptive family. Their had been an agreement that extended birth family members – grandparents, aunts and uncles - would be called "Grammy," "Pappy," "Uncle," and "Auntie," by the couples other child (who was five at the time) and eventually the baby. The birth mother was unhappy because she was being called by her first name only. She proposed a few alternative names that included "mama" in English as well as several other languages, but the adoptive parents were very much opposed to any name that included mother terminology, except for the term birth mother. Yet, "Birthmother Sara" didn't feel right or realistic to any of them. During the meeting, the birth mother was encouraged to share the intent of her request: her need to have a name that recognized her kinship to her child and his adoptive family. The adoptive parents were asked to share the impact of her request on them: uneasy entitlement and fear of competition. After sharing their feelings and needs, they were able to find a name that had special meaning to all of them and move forward without fear or resentment - each feeling entitled to fill their own unique role in the child's and family's life.

Open adoption is not a magic panacea somehow immune to the normal rules of relationships - yet often people set up unrealistic goals and envision themselves somehow having a wonderful time without having an expectation that it will take hard work. Most of us don't get married without expecting to work at relationships with our in-laws, and we should not expect to have smooth sailing in open adoption relationships. So often these matches happen guickly and always under some kind of stress, making it more like an arranged marriage than a planned one. Each of the parties must take the time to get to know one another and develop their relationship after the fact, for the sake of the one they love and have made a commitment to - their shared child. A successful, mutually respectful relationship is possible if you are all committed to working to place the other members of the triad's feelings as important and necessary. After all, it continues to be about the best interest of the adopted child and then about the needs of everyone else involved.

Adele Jones was the Director of Buckner Adoption & Maternity Services in Dallas Texas before her recent retirement. She lives there with her family and continues to be an educator and advocate for open adoption.