

## Openness In Adoption

When considering adoption, prospective parents are asked almost immediately to make a decision about whether they are seeking an open or closed adoption. Making parenting decisions before you become a parent can be challenging, particularly when they relate to a subject like adoption, about which there are many myths, assumptions, and stereotypes.

### WHAT DOES OPEN AND CLOSED ADOPTION MEAN?

An **open adoption** means there is direct contact between the adopting family and the birth family. This term includes a wide range of variations. The birth and adoptive families may speak only once before the placement of the child and have no further contact, or they may engage in extensive contact throughout their lifetimes. "Contact" can range from an annual exchange of letters and pictures to regular phone calls or in-person visits. In a **closed (sometimes called confidential) adoption**, no identifying information passes between the birth and adoptive family. Related terms that are sometimes employed include "**semi-open adoption**," which usually means that the adoptive and birth parents meet and exchange non-identifying information and maintain contact through an intermediary; and "**cooperative adoption**," in which the birth and adoptive parents agree to remain in close and ongoing contact and where the birth parents agree to play an active role in the child's life. Some adoption professionals prefer particular styles of interaction between families and will only facilitate adoptions that conform to their ideas.

### HOW DID THE SYSTEM DEVELOP?

Adoption in the United States became legally formalized in the early 1900s, when children who were adopted were issued a new birth certificate that showed only the adoptive parents and the child's adoptive name—as if the child had been born to them. The thinking was that by issuing this kind of birth certificate, adopted children would not have their private history made public and could avoid some of the stigma that child welfare professionals and adoptive parents worried they would experience if the public knew they were adopted. In the same vein, birth mothers often didn't get to ever see or hold their babies, and were encouraged to "move on" as if the baby had never been born. This thinking is rooted in the notion that adoption is something to be ashamed of and/or that adoptees would be saddled with the shame associated with their birth parents' circumstances (often out of wedlock pregnancy), and would be better off not knowing or at least not making public such information. Thus grew the system of closed adoption, where fallen women

("unwed mothers") were shamed and silenced, never to be thought of again (hopefully), and childless couples were given the chance to become parents as if they had given birth to their adopted children.

In the 1960s, when abortion was legalized and single parenthood became less stigmatized, the number of infants available for adoption decreased radically. In this new climate, professionals were pushed to listen more carefully to the needs of expectant parents who were considering placement and birth parents who already had children placed in adoption. Their voices were united and clear. Closed adoption, the system that essentially asked them to "forget" the children they had placed for adoption, did not work for them. They found themselves wracked with painful emotions and fears for their lost children. They were suffering symptoms similar to post-traumatic stress disorder as a result of the unknown disposition of their adopted children. These parents were joined by adult adoptees who had grown up in the closed system, who found that not having identifying information and not being given the option to reconnect with members of their birth family was often debilitating and frustrating for them as well. Together these two groups led the adoption reform movement pushing, as they continue to do to this day, for open records (see below) and also for more openness in placement practice. This led to a new system of domestic adoption whereby expectant parents were given some control over who adopts their children and what kind of ongoing contact they have. More recently they have been given the option in a growing number of states to have legal protection of their contact arrangement so that it is not simply dependent upon the good will of the adopting parents.

### DOES OPEN ADOPTION WORK FOR ADOPTED CHILDREN?

What we know is that closed adoption has not worked ideally for adopted people. Many adoptees have grown up feeling they didn't fit, feeling something was missing, feeling confused about where they came from and feeling it would be a betrayal of their adoptive parents and family, whom they love, to ask questions or seek information about their birth family. Open adoption developed as an answer to these haunting questions so eloquently articulated by adult adoptees. Open adoption is not co-parenting; open adoption embodies honest acceptance of the truth in adoption – each adopted person has two families and each family is critical and central to who they are.

The first children of open adoption are now nearing their thirties. Some people respond to the idea of open adoption by wondering if the children will be confused about who their “real” parents are if they know their birth parents as well as their adoptive parents. The research is still in progress, but it appears that as long as the parents are not confused, the children are not confused. In fact, they may be less confused than those whose questions go unspoken or can never be answered. Open adoptions in which the parents, birth and adoptive, understand their supportive but different roles and put their children’s interests first are working very well. In addition, by working to remove the veil of secrecy in which adoption was traditionally draped, open adoption alleviates the stigma and shame once attached to being adopted and making it a more accepted part of everyday life.

### **WHAT IF WE DON’T HAVE AN OPEN ADOPTION?**

Sometimes adoptive parents who fully understand and appreciate the benefits of open adoption find themselves in situations in which contact with the birth parents is not an option. In these situations, they can do as much as possible to provide their child with information about his or her origins, look for and cultivate opportunities for contact that may present themselves, and be available to their children to mourn the loss that lack of contact represents. Research has shown that all adoptive children think about their birth parents and, beginning during the school-age years, identify with their birth parents, whether they know them or not. This means that adoptive parents in both open and closed adoption have an important responsibility to make sure that they are initiating conversations with their children about these significant people. Parents need to make clear that they don’t feel threatened by their children’s natural curiosity about where and who they came from—or their sorrow or anger about being separated from their birth family. Children whose parents have a positive viewpoint of their birth parents have better self-esteem and a more positive sense of identity. This is called openness in adoption and is different than open adoption, because it is about an open attitude—a comfort with a child’s identity exploration, including exploration of their experience of adoption and resolution of the reality of having a connection to two families.

### **DOES OPEN ADOPTION WORK FOR BIRTH PARENTS?**

Some expectant parents anticipate that they will be better able to manage their feelings of grief and guilt if they close off their emotions towards their child—as if the birth and placement never happened. But having made such a difficult decision, it can be comforting and validating to be able to see the outcomes of that choice. Birth parents’ understanding that they have an important role in the life of their child, and that they have the answers to some of their son’s or daughter’s questions that no one else holds, can go a long way towards helping them find peace with the decision they made.

Fueled by sensationalistic media accounts, some pre-adoptive parents fear that if birth parents know where their

children are, they may want to take them back. It is extremely rare for a birth parent to change their mind about placing their child after the child has gone home with its adoptive parents. Birth parents may feel deep regret over their decision to place their child, but that does not mean they wish to disrupt their child’s life. Birth parents who have chosen their child’s adoptive parents tend to feel love and gratitude for the people who are raising their child, and have no desire to cause them pain.

### **DOES OPEN ADOPTION WORK FOR ADOPTIVE PARENTS?**

When considering adoption, many prospective parents find themselves fearful of a relationship with their child’s birth parents—as if it were a competition. But a child cannot be loved by too many people. And since those who adopt are looking for the kind of closeness unique to the parent-child relationship, the more they give their child permission to be comfortable with his or her full self (including the fact that they are connected to two families), the more closeness is likely to result in their own relationship with that child. The paradox is that when we hold people tight out of fear or insecurity, trying to make them exclusively “ours,” we can end up pushing them away.

Ultimately, open adoption is in the best interests of the child. Maintaining a relationship with a child’s birth family can be immensely rewarding for adoptive parents, although it can also be challenging sometimes—like parenting, it may be the hardest, best job you will ever have. Birth parents often live in complicated circumstances. Some are leading happy, full lives; some are struggling with the grim realities of living in poverty or other difficult issues. Sometimes adoptive parents are afraid that younger children will be frightened or harmed by the complexity of their birth parents’ lives, but in fact the children are more likely to learn acceptance of a complex situation if they can see their adoptive parents model it, instead of being left to figure out a “taboo” subject on their own. Open adoption works best for adoptive parents if they always return to the central belief that what matters is what is best for their child, not only in the present but in the future—and it is likely that will always involve as much information and knowledge as possible.

### **DON’T WE ALREADY HAVE OPEN RECORDS?**

In 2010, almost all states still seal adoption records and do not allow anyone, including adoptive parents, adult adoptees, or birth parents, to access the original birth certificate once the adoption is finalized. At Pact we believe it is a violation of adopted people’s civil rights that most states carry laws that make adoptees the only group of adults prevented from having direct access to their own birth information. Many work around this limitation on access by getting a copy of the original certificate (listing actual birth parents and the child’s original name) before the adoption is finalized, and keeping it for their child. This means that adults whose adoptive parents are supportive will get their original information, but others are still barred. Pact believes that people thrive when they have the opportunity to explore all aspects of their identity. Pact supports open records.