pact's point of view
The newsletter for adoptive families with children of color

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So You Want To Open Your Child's Adoption

by Leslie Foge

When the openness movement in the 1980's influenced domestic adoption planning in this country, there was a tremendously wide continuum representing the varied ways "openness" was expressed. In parts of the country, prospective adoptive parents and expectant women and their partners were encouraged to meet and "choose" each other and to work together to formulate their future relationship. For the remainder of the country, however, true openness in adoption has been slow in coming. Even the definition of "full openness" is debated in the adoption community. Terms like, "closed," "semi-open," "fully open," "identifying information," and "ongoing contact," mean different things to different professionals and triad members.

Although some form of "open adoption," has been available for families looking to adopt in the past 25 years, until very recently, "closed adoption" has been more of the norm across the United States. Families that were formed through closed adoption are increasingly asking about the process of searching and reuniting with birthparents. These adoptive parents are more aware of what is important in shaping their child's dual legacies and identities.

Despite the emphasis on the benefits for all triad members of maintaining ongoing relationships, there are families all across the nation that have "lost track" of their children's birthfamilies. Originally designed to combat this second rupture in connection, some open adoptions in reality have resulted in adoptive parents having to search for their child's birthparents after years of inconsistent contact. These adoptive parents realize that in the majority of situations, the availability of birthparents to their children is vastly beneficial. Some children inquire directly about their birthparents, asking when they can talk or meet. Some kids act out their questions and confusion, presenting signs of depression, anxiety, fear or behavior problems. Some children adamantly deny any interest at all in their biological roots, but their parents want to have the information should their children's interests start to shift.

Adoptive parents want to know about when is the best time to initiate a search if the adoption was not designed with ongoing contact or if the original plans of keeping in touch have faltered. Should they wait until the child expresses curiosity and interest in meeting their birthparents? Should they bring the topic up before the child asks? Should the search be conducted when the child is in grade school? In adolescence? When the child becomes an adult at 18? What if the child is struggling in school or socially or developmentally – won't a search just exacerbate things? What if the parents suspect that the birthparents have had difficulties in life and may not be a positive influence on the child?

There are no pat answers to these questions, each family must consider their child's strengths and situations, but I believe that reconnecting with birthparents, at any age, is the right decision. Consult with an adoption professional if there is any doubt in the wisdom of searching at any given point in your child's life, but know that one of your jobs, as a parent is to help your child know and accept all parts of themselves. Parents should not shield their children from the truth about their existences, but can help their children integrate and accept all the facets of their duel legacies. Vera Fahlberg, M.D., the author of A Child's Journey Through Placement once told me how to respond to an adoptive parent's questions about the benefits of reconnecting to birthparents. She said, "Rather than asking 'Why reconnect?' if any triad member is so inclined, ask 'Why NOT reconnect?' If there is not any compelling reason NOT to bring entire families together, do what you can to make it happen."

And what about the birthparents? How do they feel about being contacted years after relinquishment if on-going contact has not been maintained or agreed upon? What are some of the considerations that adoptive parents need to think about if they want to search for their child's birthparents?

It is my belief that optimally, adoptive parents should be able to easily contact the birthparents at anytime, even if ongoing contact has not been the norm. Therefore you, as adoptive parents should commence a search whenever you have lost track of your child's birthparents, whether or not you plan to directly contact them or whether or not you believe it is the best time for you child to be in touch. That way, your child's birthparents are a phone call away if it becomes clear that a connection is the right thing to do. If there has been years of no contact, the first connections should be with the adults – the adoptive parents and the birthparents. Oftentimes, adoptive parents are successful with an informal "search," – reaching out to the agency or attorney or facilitator that originally helped with the adoption. Directory assistance, the birthmother's OB/GYN, the internet and family members who played an active part in the adoption planning are some other avenues to explore in trying to locate your birthparents. If finding your child's birthparents proves to be much more complicated, there are search groups, search consultants or private investigators that can assist you.

Birthparents respond in a variety of ways to being found. For most birthmoms, very few days go by without their thinking about the baby they relinquished for adoption, even many years later. But as time goes on, lives change and your child's birthmother might have moved, gotten married, divorced, had other children, finished her education, struggled with drugs or alcohol, been professionally and/or financially successful, committed a crime, been ill or died. Anything is possible. She may have gone in and out of feeling comfortable with her adoption decision. She may or may not have told her friends or family about her baby. She may have dreamed about your phone call many times over the years and stifled the urge to initiate a search herself. Or she may have come to mistakenly believe that she had very little to add to your child or to your family.

In the matter of first contacting a birthparent after a long hiatus of contact, I recommend beginning with a letter. The letter could indicate why you are now trying to connect with her and inviter her to enter into a dialogue with you about whether ongoing contact will work for all. Reconnecting with birthparents should be very slowly paced. As contact is again reestablished, emotions for all triad members that have been long dormant will reemerge and will need to be dealt with. Perhaps, telephone conversations can be next. Reconnections that are rushed or forced can be overwhelming for all. Your child will best integrate the legacies of both their families when the adults are secure and ready.

In preparation of your child meeting his or her birthparents, the topics you can explore with your child's birthparent in advance are:

1. What are your expectations of our reunion?
2. What are your most salient fears?
3. How can I support you and still support my child?
4. This is what I will need from you to feel secure….
5. Do you have any other family members that you envision becoming a part of this extended relationship?
6. How can we let our child guide us?

Once time has passed and some important topics have been discussed between you and the birthparents, you can then facilitate contact between the birthparents and your child. Your child will need you to be excited and optimistic about opening up the adoption, despite any normal nervousness. He or she needs to know that you support their reconnecting with their first family.

One family I consulted with regarding reuniting with a birthmother had a very successful outcome. After hiring an investigator they found the birthmom living in another state. They began with a registered letter to her in which she positively responded. After several telephone calls, the adoptive parents offered to pay for a few phone consultations with me in preparation for talking with her birthchild. The birthmom had concerns about how to explain her adoption decision to her 11-year old birthchild. She also was worried that her child would ask about the birthfather who she had never named during the adoption process, but who she did have some information about. After a few phone conversations with me, the birthmom felt comfortable talking with her child. An in-person reunion was planned within a year that has set the stage for an ongoing, lifelong relationship.

Most searches initiated by adoptive parents for their children have positive outcomes. In the few cases where the outcomes are more difficult (i.e. birthparents refuse to reconnect,) adoptive parents have a difficult job to do. They must explain to the child that due to conditions, COMPLETELY OUT OF THEIR CHILD'S CONTROL, the birthparent has not been able to respond positively. This disappointing information is hard to swallow, but for your child, he or she will be comforted by knowing that they do have a parent (or parents) who loves and cares for them and supports their desire to know and connect with their birth family. Sometimes it is possible to connect with other members of the birth family who may be more open to the relationship – other times children and adoptive parents must wait out the birth parent's reluctance trying to reconnect at least a couple of times per year to let the birthparent know that when they are ready the option is still available. In the meantime parents can keep supporting their child's need and desire and help them process their disappointment while avoiding negative judgments toward the birthparents themselves.

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