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Changes in the Open Relationship

by Candace Kunz

The open adoption relationship between birth parents and adopting parents begins, initially, with a formal agreement. As the relationship grows, it is sustained by the trust and respect that evolves in the participants. Making a commitment to become involved with one another is part of the process. All must be willing to make the effort necessary to maintain agreements and to negotiate changes within the relationship.

Like other family relationships, the open adoption relationship will change during transition. The most significant transition (to put it mildly) is the birth of the baby. Prior to the birth, the participants are focused upon one another and are very much aware of each other's needs. The birth of the baby brings about a shift in focus that is sometimes startling and traumatic to the birth parents. The result may be feelings of anger or betrayal.

Post-birth changes are likely to be less traumatic if they are discussed ahead of time and if birth parents have developed sources of support beyond the adoptive parents. Birth parents must be aware that they may feel less important post-birth when the adopting parents begin to focus their attention on the newborn baby. Unfortunately, this is a time when they most need validation for their decision and efforts. What once felt like a courtship may now feel like a divorce.

Many birth parents are not aware that they have unrealistic expectations of the adopting parents or of the open adoption process. They may be idealizing the open relationship in an effort to justify their decision or to ameliorate their fears. Years down the road, if the adoptive parents divorce, or if one of them dies, the birth parent may feel betrayed, their picture-perfect ideal of the adoptive parents shattered by reality.

Some birth parents never directly acknowledge their fears, but secretly worry about letting go of the baby. They fear the grief process, and worry about whether the adoptive family will remain open to them. Any abrupt change or lack of emotional support post-birth may validate these unstated fears and result in conflict or miscommunication.

The most successful open adoption relationships are ones in which the people involved are willing to be honest and flexible. Everyone has the right to make a request and the right to say no. The open process requires recognition and acceptance of the fact that the needs and wants in the adoption relationship may not always be common to all parties. Willingness to discuss differences and misunderstandings is an acknowledgment that no one is perfect. It means accepting the inevitable changes that occur in the relationship as the adoption matures.

When planning an open adoption, it is important for all parties to remember that adoption planning sets the tone for the relationship after the birth of the baby. If the birth parents have become emotionally dependent upon the adopting parents, they are likely to remain so post-birth when their feelings are even more intense. If pre-birth contact has been intense and frequent, any post-birth distancing by either party is likely to be misconstrued. And if the participants have not made an emotional commitment to one another before the birth of the baby, it will be difficult to make that commitment post-birth when the relationship is in transition.

The bottom line is that the relationship between the birth parents and the adopting parents will become more complex as the adoption unfolds. Any unclear agreements, unstated concerns, or unrealistic expectations will surface as "issues" during times of transition. Resolving these issues is an intricate part of the evolution of the open adoption relationship. And if the participants are being true to the open process, they will define their successes by their acceptance and accommodation of the changes that occur naturally in the open relationship.