

Kinship Style: Open, Closed, or Shifting **by Gail Steinberg and Beth Hall**

Families connected by adoption often encounter a variety of challenges when it comes to their style of relating to the larger kinship group. What is the impact of open, closed, and shifting (sometimes open, sometimes closed) ways of being with our children's other families?

Over steaming plates of pasta, Kim, an adopted person, Jane, a birth parent, and Mark, an adoptive father, laugh and commiserate about their experiences. They agree that their own sense of privacy and autonomy often gets in the way.

"I've grown up in a closed adoption," Kim says. "I know I have a brother who lives with my birth mother, but we've never met. I've never met anyone in my birth family, though I hope I will some day. Anyway, when strangers ask me how many brothers and sisters I have, I don't always say the same thing," Kim admits. "If I count my birth brother along with the brothers I grew up with, a bunch of questions come up about it and I get mad at myself for getting sucked into saying too much. But if I say I have two brothers and eliminate him, in my heart, it's like saying he's dead. Even when I don't feel like telling my adoption story, I don't feel right doing that. I feel like I'm betraying a part of myself."

"Our adoption is open but it started out closed," Mark says. "When I first met Mary, my daughter Lynn's birth mother, I had no idea who she really was," he admits, "or that we could ever be anything to each other. I wanted a closed relationship. I didn't want Lynn to be confused. We wasted quite a few years playing hide and seek with each other. Deep down, I was so afraid that if they knew each other, Lynn would love Mary better than she loves us, I just couldn't stand to take the risk. Then Lynn ended up in the hospital, in intensive care, and we needed Mary's information. She was more than just there for us. She was knowledgeable about life and death in their family. Mary knew Lynn's biological inheritance. Being able to benefit from what she knew may have saved Lynn's life. Mary wasn't squeamish about Lynn's vomit, or smell,

or blood. She had the strength to be able to stand what was happening and to take it and to help. It turned out Lynn had a rare blood disease that had surfaced before in their family. When I finally understood how connected Mary and Lynn would always be to each other without taking anything away from our family, my feelings started untangling in a way that felt new. I started being able to relax around Mary. I found out I could trust her. I began to understand that her love for Lynn is like mine. Now we can't imagine not seeing her. We are able to share future dreams and even talk about the sadness of the past. I'm deeply grateful she's a part of our lives."

"When I placed Jason, I promised his adoptive parents that I would never intrude on their privacy," Jane said. "But five years later when they tracked me down and sent me a wonderful letter about Jason, inviting me to call them. I did. We got together a few times and it was just terrific. Getting to know them was as delicious as a honeymoon. I went to Jason's birthday party, then Thanksgiving, then Christmas, and you know what? I needed a break. Getting together started to feel like obligatory. I didn't feel good about going because their family seemed like a complete system. I felt like an extra appendage. I was both invited in and kept out, sort of like an intrusive Auntie might be. It got very confusing. I had the feeling I was supposed to be performing some unidentified bit part, but had to make sure I made my entrances and exits on cue. I decided to space my visits as widely apart as possible to try to avoid hurting their feelings. Some times I really love to go over and see Jason. Sometimes I just don't feel like it."

Relationships within a kinship group will be open, closed, or shift back and forth with the emotions and circumstances of the participants. Because so many different feelings are involved, these relationships tend to be complex but worth working out. Doing so benefits the child. It's important to realize that situations change over time and that situations change in response to life events. It's never too late to develop a child-driven kinship system, a system in which the needs of the child guide the adult participants.