

# Open Adoption Relationships

by Becca Martinson

- Open Adoption: Black-market babies. Birth mothers knocking on doors, demanding their children back. Adoptive parents promising the moon, then renege once they have their child.
- Or - Open Adoption: Birth mothers satisfied because they know the outcome of their children's lives. Adopted people growing up comforted by the knowledge of where they came from. Everyone living happily ever after.

Which is the reality? It would be naive to pretend that there is no selling of babies, or that birth parents and adoptive parents never break their commitments. But the vast majority of open adoptions contain none of these elements. The reality, in most cases, lies somewhere between the two extremes.

What is open adoption? Ten years ago, when open adoption first began making waves, it was defined as any adoption in which there was an exchange of information between birth parents and adoptive parents. This exchange could be as minimal as medical information passed through an adoption agency or lawyer. Or it could extend to the point of birth families and adoptive families sharing birthdays, holidays, vacations, and parenting decisions.

Today, minimal communication would qualify an adoption as semi-open. After ten years of gestation, open adoption is now commonly defined as an adoption in which there is an open exchange of information and in which there is an option for ongoing contact, without an intermediary, should both parties want to continue the relationship.

## Why Open Adoption?

Open adoption, when done responsibly, offers the potential for all parties in the adoption triad (birth parents, adoptive parents and adopted people) to benefit from the flow of communication. Birth parents are spared some of the anguish caused by not knowing what kind of people adopted their children. Adopted people grow up with some of their "who am I?" questions answered. And adoptive parents benefit by having children with a greater sense of self. All parties feel an increased sense of control over their lives.

The benefits of open adoption are difficult to prove with existing research. Because of its relative newness and a lack

of data in general, results of open adoption have not been documented in any major studies (although some are now in the works). In contrast, the problems associated with closed adoptions have been well-documented. Many adoption professionals now believe in the benefits of open adoption, and anecdotal results are promising. All members of the adoption triad encounter grief and loss from the adoption experience, but with the veil of secrecy lifted, they are better able to work through their feelings.

## Why Not Open Adoption?

Some of the bad press for open adoption comes because many people associate it with baby-buying. They mistakenly think that when birth parents choose the adoptive parents for their child, the choice is in exchange for money. Black-market baby selling schemes are actually the rare exception and virtually never involve children of color. To protect against baby selling, ethical adoption practices require exact financial records to prove that all expenditures paid to the birth parents are for actual expenses.

Another criticism of open adoption involves the belief that openness gives birth parents an opportunity to show up at the adoptive parents door and demand the child back. Statistics on the number of disruptions after placement of the child by independent adoption range from two percent to five percent. Very rarely do birth parents actually show up at the adoptive parents' doors.

Perhaps the most common criticism of open adoption is that it will create confusion for the child. How will he know who his "real" mother and father are? The answer is that children learn from their families. If the birth parents and adoptive parents don't feel confused by their relationship (however it's structured), the child won't either.

Most of the problems associated with open adoption stem from unrealistic expectations and lack of communication between birth parents and adoptive parents. Birth parents are anxious to place their child and fear rejection. Adoptive parents are anxious to have a child and fear rejection. These problems are often avoided when the adoption is mediated by a responsible agency, facilitator or lawyer. At the very least, all parties should receive counseling to help them be realistic about the situation and their expectations.

## **The Relationship**

The biggest difference between open and closed adoption is that open adoption requires the extra effort of forming and maintaining a relationship. Like any relationship, it will be complex. And like any relationship, it's up to the parties involved to set limits and (most important of all) to communicate. How much contact do they want, before and after the birth? Do they want to exchange pictures and letters? Do birth parents want to see the child on an ongoing basis? Do the adoptive parents agree? It's hard to foresee all of the situations that will occur and how each person will feel, but it's to everyone's benefit for all parties to be as clear with

themselves, and with each other, as possible.

The open adoption relationship can become very intense very quickly. In few situations will either party ever again experience so much intimacy and so much unfamiliarity at the same time. The partnership is bound to go through many evolutions of connection and distancing.

Ultimately, the most important consideration is the child. Powerful fears and emotions will occur for both birth parents and adoptive parents. It's important for them to realize that, whatever problems arise, it's to the benefit of the child for all to work at maintaining the relationship.