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

First published in Pact's Point of View © 1996
Do not reprint without permission.

Please Tell Me What I Should Do?

by Lynn Lape

Terri called on the advice of her attorney. She needed to talk to a birth parent before deciding whether to place the baby she was carrying for adoption. Her words were beseeching me. Please, tell me what I should do?

Kim called because a friend had met a birth parent who talked about how helpful the group had been for her after she placed her baby for adoption. The friend handed Kim the number, urging her to call. The basics: Kim wants to place her baby for adoption but the dad is promising to fight for custody himself once the baby is born; Kim recently left dad because of his abuse. Her words were pleading. Please, tell me what I should do?

My name is Lynn, and I am the first-line contact at the Cincinnati Birth Parents' Support group. I strive to give triad members and their families as much information as possible about their choices. If the caller is pregnant and considering adoption for her baby, that means educating her about both parenting and adoption, so she can make the best decision for herself and her child. I was once a single teen mom. At 21, I became pregnant again while still a single parent. I chose to place my second son for adoption. So I've been there.

I don't tell these moms what to do, though. We talk about basic legal issues, but I strongly encourage them to contact the local attorney who specializes in working with only birth parents about legal issues, and encourage them to call the adoption agencies as well. I give them adoption information sheets, articles and resource lists and I send them brochures on community resources available to help mom explore parenting her child herself. We discuss the risks of doing nothing, of lying to and about dad, and anything else that is specific to a woman's situation. We also discuss the importance of dad participating in the decision making and planning — this is his baby, too.

Support meetings are held twice a month, allowing birth parents to meet other birth parents and to discover what worked for some and what didn't for others. In the end, it is each woman's own life, and she must make the decisions and she, not I, must live with them. Only now, after talking to us, she should be better equipped to make those decisions — more so than I was and than too many other birth parents are.

The best-made adoption plans are those founded on a process of clear, educated decision-making which includes exploring the good and the bad of adoption. They are the adoption plans least at risk for a change of heart and reclamation after the baby has gone to a prospective adoptive home.

Over the years, I have come to believe that these moms have to choose between the lesser of two traumas — to parent when not quite ready or to place her baby for adoption. An untimely pregnancy is rarely resolved perfectly, and life is never again the same. Sometimes, parents of pregnant teens need to have this truth explained again and again; they hope that if the baby is placed for adoption, their little girl will go back to being the teenager she was before the pregnancy. This hope is unrealistic — their daughter is now a mother. The decision must balance the traumas of parenting in the current family situation against the traumas of the separation of mother and child.

Parenting is often easier to take stock of than adoption. Most women, even teens, have some clue as to what they are capable of and whom they can trust to follow through on promises. Single moms should reach out to their current support system as well as to community resources designed to help parents. Whatever is currently impeding the birth family's ability to parent may well be temporary and surmountable.

Our society places such importance on doing things in the proper order: high school to job or college, then career and marriage, before children. Yet today, many adults are creating non-traditional ways to fulfill their lifetime goals when detours appear. At 32, now as a wife and mother of two, I am finishing my first year of part-time night law school. The majority of men and women in my class are around thirty, and many have families. The arrival of an unplanned child does not mean your life is ruined, your goals never to be achieved. It does mean that priorities and plans need to be changed. A lifetime is still ahead of you, and college and career can probably wait. A child cannot wait.

If it appears that the birth family can capably parent the child, adoption need never be explored. The birth family's energies should be concentrated on preparing for the arrival of their

new family member. Only in those cases where successful parenting by the birth family is in jeopardy should adoption be discussed. Adoption is permanent. Adoption must be permanent. Our children need and deserve permanency as early in their lives as is possible. But the permanency and the significant consequences of adoption demand that it never be undertaken on the basis of vague ideas. Our children deserve better.

What about the trauma of adoption? A summary of lifelong issues facing birth parents is succinctly covered in the information sheet, "The Impact of Adoption on Birth Parents," available free from the National Adoption Information Clearinghouse, 11426 Rockville Pike, Suite 410, Rockville MD 20852 301-231-6512. It covers coping with grief, issues involved in parenting future children, romantic relationships, the birth and placement experience, life while your child is a minor, search and reunion, and coping strategies.

Adoption plays a necessary part in our society. We are always going to have children born to families which, despite whatever intervention is provided, are unable to care for their child(ren) adequately. This is where adoption starts: with those children truly in need of a second family to complete the job started by the birth family. In exploring adoption, birth families need assistance in finding prospective adoptive parents who are educated and open about adoption; people who know how to handle grief themselves and who will help their child grieve. People who can celebrate differences: this child may fit right in with the chosen adoptive family, but then again, the child's temperament or life outlook could be significantly different.

Sometimes birth parents get caught up in the excitement felt by the potential adoptive parents at the prospect of the child becoming a member of the adoptive family. As she comes to know and care for the prospective parents, the birth mom can lose sight of her own needs and abilities to parent her child. This distraction is another reason to wait until parenting appears to be improbable before looking at adoption. Planning on parenting and adoption are both emotionally draining and should be tackled one at a time. This advice is similar to that given to many infertile couples: either continue fertility treatment or work towards adoption, one or the other. To do them simultaneously is unrealistic. It is also unreasonable to ask a young mother to divide herself in such a way, choosing between parenting and adoption.

We should not shy away from the truth about adoption for fear of scaring away a potential birth mom. We must give her the respect she deserves as she shifts through the imperfect solutions of parenting and adoption, offering her the chance to choose what is best for her baby. In our experience with this approach at Birth Parents' Support, those who do choose adoption feel more strongly committed to the decision. To offer her anything less is to take the decision away from her.