

Ask Pact

Unexpected Birth Parent Contact

Q: *We adopted our 8-year-old daughter, Carmella, through what we thought was a "semi-open" adoption. When the adoption was arranged, we were told that we should send letters and pictures once a year to Denise through the agency. We have been doing that regularly, right around our daughter's birthday. This year, though, about a month after the birthday letter, Denise responded to our letter for the first time by sending us a letter through our agency. She said thank you for the letters and pictures through the years, and said that she'd like to talk with our daughter and get her know her personally. She said we could contact her directly. She told us to let Carmella know Denise thinks of her often, and "be sure she knows I love her." We're not sure what to do. How can she love her when she doesn't even know her? We thought we might have to deal with this in Carmella's teen years because of Carmella's own questions. We're not sure what to tell Carmella now, and whether to open the door for her to be in touch with her birth mother at this age. We don't know Denise at all, and feel uncomfortable putting Carmella in touch with someone who is a total stranger. We have kept our end of the bargain to send updates, and now it seems like she is trying to change the deal. This isn't what we signed up for. Help!*

A: It is very common for adoptive parents to feel fearful when they hear from their child's birth parent unexpectedly. This is even true for those who at the time they adopted said they were open to ongoing contact with their child's birth family. The contact often triggers fears that perhaps the birth parents want their child back or regret their decision to make an adoption plan (if they had the choice.) Adoptive parents may feel nervous that the child will respond to their birth parent in some way that will usurp their own position with their now much loved son or daughter. That unfortunately all too familiar sense of society's view of adoptive parents as second best can set in and become the unspoken elephant in the room. It can fuel the reasons and excuses that adoptive parents find themselves throwing out in response to an unexpected invitation from their child's birth parent.

Or, adoptive parents may react to the negative stereotypes of birth parents, a stereotype that may have been supported by the social workers or others involved with them at the time of placement. They may have images of birth parents as a group of parents who don't really care about their children, have poor boundaries and are sure to be angry at the system that "took their child away from them."

It is important for adoptive parents to do as you are doing by taking a step back from the initial emotional reaction and recognizing how important this connection is to Carmella. We applaud you for not making an overly quick or reactive decision, but rather seeking careful guidance to find a thoughtful and appropriate response.

Here are our thoughts:

Give yourself room to have your own reaction but be aware that your worst fears are emotional and not necessarily based in fact. This emotional reaction needs and deserves to be handled separately from the decision about how to respond to Denise's request.

Pay attention to your reaction in the larger context of how you handle surprises or life events that throw you for a loop. If you are the kind of person who embraces the unexpected in general this will probably be easier for you than if you are the sort who is a planner and always makes considered decisions. Take these temperamental truths into account in order to assure yourself that your own temperament does not become the reason you either do or don't let your daughter and her birth mother have contact.

Try to think honestly about the difference between what meets your needs and what may meet your daughter's. Sometimes making a list of how you might feel depending on your position in this triad can help. For instance, as an adoptive parent, you might prefer to wait and have contact with Denise later, if ever. If you had been adopted as a baby, however, and now had the chance to be in touch with your birth mother how would you feel? Would you be curious? Would you want to know why you were placed, or who you look like? Would you have other questions you want answered "straight from the horse's mouth?" If you were a birth parent, would you wonder what your child is actually like? Would you be nervous that you were going to be rejected because "after all, you had your chance and let her go?" As parents, it is your job and Denise's job (because remember she is

also a parent of a different kind) to really understand Carmella's needs and put them first, ahead of your own.

When adults make decisions for kids, the adults usually sit down and discuss what is best for the child prior to involving the child. We don't involve young children in the first discussion we have with doctors when we are making important medical decisions on their behalf or with teachers when we are making important educational ones.

We often seek advice when we are making decisions about new information. From what you are describing, it sounds like you don't really know Denise personally. At a minimum, consider talking with her, (face to face preferably as we all get to know others more easily when we do it that way), perhaps guided by your agency or some other professional who can help you all establish some communication and trust. Certainly Carmella will be glad to hear later that you did not simply blow off the opportunity to gain more information about her birth heritage and you will feel better knowing that you stretched at far as possible to put Carmella's needs first by hearing directly from Denise what her intentions and hopes are for this relationship.

You make several statements in your question that bear direct responses as they represent points of view commonly held among adoptive parents.

We don't know Denise at all, and feel uncomfortable putting Carmella in touch with someone who is a total stranger. While the fact that you don't know Denise seems to put her in the category of "stranger" this situation is fundamentally different. Because Denise gave birth to Carmella, they are relatives and will be forever. This doesn't mean that you should send Carmella off by herself to meet Denise for the first time, but it probably does mean that you should consider this opportunity with an eye to Carmella's long-term needs. If you reject Denise now, how will Carmella feel if you aren't able to find Denise ever again and she never gets to have contact with her? There are many situations where 8 year olds do meet new adults – think of less well-known family members like great-aunts or distant cousins with whom you aren't in regular contact. Why couldn't contact between Denise and Carmella happen under the same principles you might apply in those situations?

We have kept our end of the bargain to send updates, and now it seems like she is trying to change the deal. Relationships are not immutable contracts. People evolve and needs change. Let go of this attitude and instead consider asking why things have changed now. Do your best to understand what is motivating Denise. The more you understand her the less likely you are to feel threatened or fearful.

How can she love her when she doesn't even know her? If you care about ancestors in your family that you have never met or babies you tried to conceive but never carried to term or people who belong to a group that you are a member of even when you don't know every member personally, you already know the answer to this question. Connections make us care, and sometimes even make us love. Carmella and Denise have a powerful connection.

We thought we might have to deal with this in Carmella's teen years because of Carmella's own questions... not now. More and more adoption professionals are urging families who have the opportunity to have contact with birth families to do so prior to the teen years. Teens are already volatile emotionally and often struggle with identity issues. Many adopted teens feel very strongly about their birth families. There may be strong curiosity – a feeling of searching for self – and perhaps a sense of pain and abandonment. Having some of their questions answered, and having the opportunity to deal with the feelings that the answers may cause before they confront teen identity questions can help the teen years be more of a growing process and less of an identity crisis.

Finally, keep in mind there may be a great deal for you to learn and find out in a relationship with Denise that wasn't captured in the paperwork and information she gave when the placement was made. No matter how forthcoming she was, there might be new medical or family information that proves really valuable to Carmella and you as her parents. Remember two things. First, your daughter is your daughter and that will not change. Second, human beings have a limitless capacity to give and receive love. If Carmella develops a loving relationship with Denise with your support and permission, it will in no way threaten your own relationship with her. In fact, it may increase the trust and closeness as she sees once again that you care about her needs. Good luck and try to enjoy what could be a wonderful opportunity for your daughter and your family.