

A Brief Description of Open Adoption

It's hard to imagine a term more misunderstood than "open adoption." Between the imprecision of the word *open* and the many variations in the ways that "open adoption" is practiced, the words are at risk to lose their capacity to carry much if any useful information. The confusion surrounding open adoption is not an insignificant matter because confusion easily leads to unmet expectations and disappointment. Our first task, then, as we begin our consideration of this subject, is to clarify some of the language commonly used in the practice of adoption.

Here are some words people use:

- "Openness in adoption" is a phrase that suggests a range of options is available. The expression correctly indicates that adoption arrangements are not all alike; some are more open than others. This phrase does not, however, indicate how extensive the options are, so it is important for potential adoption participants to gain clarity about the exact nature of the available options.
- "Open placement" means the birth family and adoption family have some time-limited interaction. Most of the interaction is pre and perinatal, and it usually ends within a year of placement.
- "Semi-open adoption" suggests that some information will be exchanged and that some limited ongoing communication may be possible. Coming from another angle, some people refer to this approach as "modified closed adoption".
- "Open adoption" is a form of adoption in which the child enjoys a continuing relationship with his/her birth family. The communication and interaction between the families is direct, ongoing and centered on meeting the needs of the child.

There are several ways to get a handle on open adoption. One approach is to describe the behaviors it involves. In most open adoption plans, the birth family selects the prospective adoptive family before the baby is born. The two families meet face to face and exchange full identifying information. Together they negotiate a mutually satisfactory plan for the many years of interaction that lies ahead.

Although open adoption involves a set of observable behaviors, it is better understood as a set of attitudes. Open adoption only comes fully alive when it is founded on sincere care and mutual respect. Psychologist Randolph Severson states it well when he puts open adoption in the context of "courage, compassion and common sense." It takes courage to face uncertainty, compassion to consider the experience from the perspective of others, and common sense to give the situation the practicality necessary so it truly serves the interests of everyone involved. When attitudes are positive and birth families and adoptive families work cooperatively and sacrificially in behalf of children, the results can be extraordinary. On the other hand, an arrangement that meets the technical definition of open adoption but lacks heart does not satisfy its attitudinal necessities.

The best way to understand open adoption is to think of it as a relationship. Relationships are at the heart of open adoption. This is a helpful way to think of open adoption because, although the idea of open adoption may strike some as novel, everyone knows something about how relationships work. Some relationships, of course, are easier to maintain than others, but most are very cordial. It is not unusual for birth parents and adoptive parents to see each other as friends, although it does not always work out that way. If not friends, we at least hope for friendly.

In *The Children of Open Adoption*, Kathleen Silber and Patricia Martinez Domer observe that there is a distinctive quality to this relationship. They suggest that the relationship is familial, that it has the feel of “kinship.” They write, “In open adoption, the birth family is extended family, like other relatives within the adoptive family.” This insight sheds additional light on open adoption and de-mystifies open adoption even more. Most of us have a range of feelings about our extended family – some members are more enjoyable than others – but few would argue that they are unimportant.

The most common problems associated with open adoption are essentially relationship issues. Does a plan to get together at 3:00 on Saturday mean 3:00, or does it mean some time that afternoon? As most any half hour sitcom television show amply illustrates, the opportunity for misunderstandings to pop up in any relationship is unlimited. On the other hand, all of the joys we know through relationships are also available through open adoption.

The great advantage of open adoption is that it liberates birth parents, adoptive parents, and adopted persons from the burdens of secrecy that were built into the closed system of adoption. Secrecy stirs powerful psychology. Virtually everyone knows something from personal experience of the tension and anxiety that goes with keeping secrets. Similarly, everyone knows the frustration of “being in the dark.” It is an obvious truth that most of us are far more comfortable when “all the cards are on the table” and we know the facts of the situation we are in.

It is important to note that open adoption arrangements are not enforceable under Michigan. (In several states in the western region of the United States, open adoption contracts do fall under provisions of the civil courts.) Since the dynamic that sustains these relationships over time is trust, it is crucial that they are entered into with utmost care. If a participant turns out to be unreliable, there is no where to turn for recourse.

Although open adoption is literally as old as Moses, it has only taken hold in the United States in the last couple of decades. For that reason, research findings about open adoption are still limited. With some exceptions, most of the research to date suggests that participants are very satisfied with the way their arrangements are working.

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