Competencies

201-09-001 Knows the range of options for openness in adoption, their advantages and disadvantages, and the potential effects on children and their adoptive and birth families

201-09-002 Knows the characteristics of birth family members, adoptive family members, and adoptees that support adoption openness

201-09-003 Understands the potential ethical and practical dilemmas involved in open adoptions

201-09-004 Understands the nature of potential conflicts between adoptive and birth families in open adoptions and the effects on the child

201-09-005 Understands the benefit of openness in helping adopted children sustain relationships with people to whom they are strongly attached

201-09-006 Understands the effects of openness in helping children form their adult identities

201-09-008 Understands how an adopted child’s relationship with birth family members may change over time, depending on the child’s age, developmental needs, and birth family circumstances

201-09-010 Knows how to help adoptive and birth families negotiate and resolve conflicts in their relationship and in their roles with the child

201-09-011 Knows how to prepare adoptive families to anticipate and manage the challenges and stresses children experience from contact with birth family members

201-09-012 Can help families assess whether adoption openness should be considered and the most appropriate level of openness for the adopted child and family
AGENDA

OPENNESS IN ADOPTION

DAY I

SECTION I. Introductions
SECTION II. Myth Busters
SECTION III. Establishing Foundational Principles - Open Adoption vs. Openness in Adoption
SECTION IV. Historical and Ethical Perspectives of Open/Closed Adoptions
SECTION V. Advantages/Challenges for Triad Members
SECTION VI. Long Term Issues/Feelings

DAY II

SECTION VII. Facilitation of Open Adoptions
SECTION VIII. Openness Jeopardy
SECTION IX. Opening a Closed Adoption
SECTION X. Putting It All Together — Transfer of Learning
Fact or Fantasy??

1. Openness in adoption refers to an ongoing, face-to-face relationship between the birth parents, the adopted child, and the adoptive parents.

2. When birth parents and adoptive parents enter into an open adoption agreement, they have entered into an agreement which is not legally binding or “enforceable” in court.

3. Social workers involved in open adoption work must maintain control of the placement and the relationship between the birth and adoptive parents.

4. Openness in adoption supports the child’s racial and cultural identity development.

5. When parental rights have been involuntarily terminated due to abuse/ neglect, the adoption should remain closed to protect both the child and the adoptive family.

6. Open adoption refers to a relationship between an adopted person and his or her birth parent(s).

7. Once an adoption is finalized, the parties cannot change their minds regarding the degree of openness.

8. Openness in adoption eliminates grief for the adopted person.

9. Open adoptions are similar to joint custody in divorce situations in that the birth parents and the adoptive parents will be co-parenting.

10. When conflicts arise in an open adoption relationship, the birth and adoptive families can turn to a mediator who, after talking with both parties in conflict, will make a decision about who is "right".
Open Adoption and Openness in Adoption: Two Case Studies

The following are two case studies that examine family structured openness and open communicative process.

Annalise, age 14

Part One
Curly red hair and a quick wit describe Annalise, who entered her adoptive home as a newborn. Very little is known about her birth parents, except what was written on the note attached to her blanket and her physical description. Annalise was one of her state’s first Safe Haven babies and was taken to a local fire department just hours after birth. On the note her birth mother wrote – “please forgive me for doing this. I am just too young to take care of a baby. I am just 16 and am homeless.” The fire department official who was there on that cold evening described the young woman as petite, red-haired, very, very young and afraid.

Although the agency involved in her placement into the adoptive family attempted many times to locate her birth mother within the community, all efforts failed. So much time has passed now, it is extremely doubtful that Annalise and her family will ever know anything.

How would you characterize this adoption? Open or closed

Part Two
Despite the fact that Annalise’s parents have had no information about her birth parents except her birth mother’s physical description, they have been open and honest with her from the beginning. They have created a family atmosphere that is emotionally attuned to her needs. They are empathic to Annalise’s concerns and questions, talk openly, but not excessively about adoption issues, acknowledge the frustration of not knowing more about her birth family and acknowledge her frustration of not knowing more about them. Although her adoption is structurally closed, the family atmosphere can best be characterized by open, honest, and emotionally attuned communication.¹

¹ Brodzinsky, David and Palacios, Jesus, editors, (2007), Psychological Issues in Adoption, (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishing), page 150
Micah, age 12

Part One
Micah, a handsome, sensitive 12-year-old joined his family as an infant. Much is known about his birth parents and his birth extended family. Before Micah was born, his adoptive parents met his birth mother and birth father and both of their families. They exchanged all identifying information, unique family highlights and set up a plan for contact. Over the years, Micah has grown up visiting his birth mother and birth father about three times a year. He always receives birthday cards from his birth grandparents, as well as gifts on special occasions. He sees them usually over the Christmas holidays each year. If you ask Micah who he looks like, he quickly responds, “I look just like my birth dad and we even like the same sport team.”

How would you characterize this adoption? Open or closed

Part Two
Although Micah has experienced a family structured open adoption and his parents have kept their promise, they admit to originally feeling pressured into this agreement. They knew if they didn’t agree, Micah’s birth mother would not have chosen them. Although they continue to allow the contacts, they do not talk to Micah about his birth family. Whenever his raises a question about his birth mother or why the adoption plan was made, his parents change the subject or provide somewhat superficial and “emotionally unattuned responses.”

One of Micah’s unspoken frustrations (known only to a friend), is that his parents never allow him to express his feelings about his adoption. “Whenever I say something about how I feel about my adoption stuff,” Micah told a friend, “my parents always say, ‘there is no reason to feel that way….Mom and Dad love you so much.’”

The atmosphere in Micah’s home around adoption issues lacks parental sensitivity, understanding and appropriate responsiveness to his needs.

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2 Brodzinsky
3 Brodzinsky
Definitions

1. **Confidential/Closed adoption** – No identifying information is shared between the birth family and adoptive family. This is also called confidential or traditional adoption. Information may be given to the agency to update the records, but is not intended for transmission to either party (McRoy, et. al., 1998).

2. **Semi-Open or Mediated Open Adoption** - refers to the continuum of openness within relationships that can exist between members of the birth family and the adoptive family of a child. Openness may include knowledge of information about the “other” family of the child, the birthparent’s selection of an adoptive family for the child, contact through a third party, or ongoing visitation. The relationships may exist between the child, adoptive family and the birth parents or between the child, adoptive parents and birth siblings, grandparents, other relatives or kinship figures (including former foster parents). Mediated openness assumes the involvement of a third party who facilitates contact by passing letters and other communication between the all the parties involved.

**Mediated arrangements can look like this:**

- In time-limited mediated adoptions, information had been shared through an agency caseworker but had stopped, with no plans to resume sharing.

- In ongoing mediated adoptions, information exchange mediated by the agency was currently occurring.

3. **Fully Disclosed Open Adoption** - means that everyone involved in the process, whether adoptive or birth parent, is
open to meeting and talking with each other both prior to, and subsequent to, the placement. They know each other's names and contact information. How much communication and contact will occur is impossible to say. But in an open adoption, the assumption exists that there will be as much communication as possible within the limits of courage, compassion, and common sense (Randolph Severson, 1997).

Some openness arrangements can look like this:

- In time-limited fully disclosed adoptions, birth and adoptive parents had direct fully identified contact, but this contact stopped, and there was no intention for future contact.

- In ongoing fully disclosed adoptions, direct sharing of information was continuing and usually accompanied by face-to-face meetings.*

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Openness in adoption encompasses different forms of direct or indirect communication between a child and her or his caregivers and a range of people, including birth parents, siblings, members of the extended family, and previous foster parents.
Continuum of Open Relationships

1. Adoptive couple picks up newborn at agency. Only medical information is given to the family.

2. Birth parent chooses family. No names are given. Non-identifying profile of families exchanged

3. Birth parent chooses the family and arrangements are made through the agency for a time-limited mediated openness plan. The time limitation is two years.

4. Adoptive parents, who have been fostering their soon to be adopted child, know the birth parents and agree to an open adoption. Following finalization, however, the adoptive parents begin to find excuses to avoid contact.

5. Birth parent chooses and meets the family. Together they plan the on-going relationship, and the families create a contract spelling out the contact they will have in the future, as well as a plan for mediation when conflicts arise.

6. Child is involuntarily removed from birthparents’ home and placed into a foster home. Foster and birth parents meet at visits. Only first names are exchanged. Foster parents apply to adopt after child is freed for adoption. No visitation will occur after adoption, but adoptive and birth families will exchange letters and pictures through the agency worker in an on-going mediated arrangement.

7. Four siblings are involuntarily removed from the birth parents’ home. Two sets of siblings are placed in two foster homes. Both foster parents adopt the children they have fostered. The children will have ongoing visitation with each other.
What We Are Learning

Openness in Communication

Structurally Open Relationships

1. Openness in adoption is best understood as a process of communication along a continuum. The continuum of communication ranges from family members who demonstrate an openness and willingness to discuss and process adoption related concerns to family members who are hesitant, and even deny their own thoughts and feelings.

2. Openness in adoption isn’t about just passing on information, but it is about creating an environment where children feel they have the emotional permission to explore and express feelings. Children perceive very early in their adoption relationship whether it is okay to ask adoption related questions. Parents set the communication agenda very early in their child’s life.

3. Openness in adoption communication is best understood as an increasing need and process over time. Throughout the life of an adopted child, his parents and his birth parents, communication will change as the needs of the child change. Life isn’t stagnant.

Structurally Open Relationships

1. Open Adoption does not create emotional insecurity.
   In the most comprehensive study of open adoption to date, Dr. Harold Grotevant and Dr. Ruth McRoy discovered a very clear pattern:

   Parents in fully disclosed adoptions demonstrate high degrees of empathy about adoption, talk about it more openly with their children, and are less fearful that the birthmother might try to reclaim her child than are parents in confidential adoption.

2. Open adoption is not co-parenting.

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6 Oliver, Dr. Jane Holt, Malone College, personal communication.
This particular perception originates from confusion regarding boundaries and roles in open adoption. “In co-parenting, the parent figures have equal authority, roles and access. In open adoption, there is no equivalency in authority, roles, or access.”

a. **Examining Authority**

In examining the question of authority, it is important to note that birthparents in open adoption have no legal authority. They have no legal standing. The open adoption relationship is to be built from a foundation of cooperation and trust.

b. **Roles – Who is Mom? Who is Dad?**

A child identifies “who is mom?” as the person who carries out the endless and innumerable tasks required in loving and nurturing a child. The birthmother’s role is viewed as that of an aunt (not called that) or special adult friend.

c. **Access – a matter of emotional distance**

Critics of open adoption like to portray the birthparents as people stalking the neighborhoods, lurking in dark alleys, or hiding in the backseat of cars, waiting to appear at a most inconvenient moment. According to Gritter, “critics routinely overlook the fact that birth families, just like adoptive families, want a measure of emotional distance. Many of them set aside the prospect of adoption in their extended families because it struck them as a little too much and a little too close.”

3. **Open adoption is not glorified baby-sitting.**

Some individuals who are critics of open adoption suggest that what it really means is the adoptive parents do all the hard work, and the birth parents just get the “good” stuff. Furthermore, when the child reaches 21, he leaves to return to his birth family. That premise is based on the erroneous concept that over two decades of emotional intimacy built through daily interaction can be wiped away without thought.

4. **There is room for privacy in open adoption relationships.**

A major concern for those who question open adoption is the perception that there is no room for privacy in open adoption. “Certainly open adoption features - candor and transparency, but the sharing is purposeful and kept within the limits of common courtesy and decency. There is much that each family needs to know

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about the other if they are to enter a relationship intelligently and are to serve the adoptee well over time. On the other hand, there is much that does not need to be known. Healthy open relationships feature reasonable and mutually respected boundaries."
Historical Perspectives of Openness in Adoption

Child’s original identity remained known to all. Adoption was viewed as a social responsibility. Cultural groups who had a more communal style of parenting and child care did not embrace secrecy.

As the number of immigrants to America drastically increased, many chose to hide their past to avoid discrimination. Concurrently, research findings indicated that the healthy development of a child was due to healthy environmental factors, not their social, genetic or ethnic past.

The first law passed in Minnesota that required the closing of adoption records. Records were sealed, and a new birth certificate was issued.

Other states passed similar legislation. “Institutionalized secrecy became the rule, rather than the exception” (Severson, 1997). It was assumed that anonymity would protect members of the triad and help them move on.

The stigma attached to being unmarried and pregnant lessened with the introduction of birth control, the legalization of abortion, and more women parented. With fewer available babies for adoption, birthmothers had the leverage to demand more input into their children’s futures. Support and legislative advocacy groups like ALMA (Adoptees’ Liberty Movement Association) and CUB (Concerned United Birthparents) were formed. In addition, transracial adoptions increased, making adoption secrecy more difficult when the child did not look like the adoptive parents.

The Minnesota “twins studies” caused social scientists to cease to deny the importance of “nature” in human development. Agencies began re-introducing openness, and researchers began longitudinal studies of the outcomes of such practices.

Preliminary findings of open adoption studies (Grotevant and McRoy, 1998; Berry, 1993; Siegel, 1993) suggest that openness enhances the experiences of all triad members.

The activist group Bastard Nation successfully won their fight for open adoption records in Oregon. The 2000 Census was the first census to count the number of adoptees. http://www.census.gov/main/www/cen2000.html

To learn more, visit the Univ. of Oregon Independent Adoption Center’s Adoption History Project at http://www.adoptionhistory.org/
Ethical Considerations in Open Adoption

Examining the mainstream ethical considerations and guidelines found in the National Association of Social Worker Code of Ethics and from other researchers that have examined the subject, the following are key ethical principles to be highlighted in open adoption.

Principle 1: Responsibility to Clients and Self-Determination

Social workers must understand their responsibility to their clients, whether that client is a birth parent or adoptive parent. That means each party is entitled to be informed of their legal rights, information and provision of pre- and post-placements services and support. Each party should have the right to self-determination without “exploitation or abuse of any participant.”

Principle 2: Integrity

Social workers must understand their responsibility to avoid undue influence in helping to facilitate an open adoption. Birth parents have a right to fully understand the benefits and potential issues within open adoption, as do the adoptive parents.

Principle 3: Care and Protection of the Most Vulnerable

Social workers employed in the field of child welfare must understand from an ethical perspective that the child is of most importance. Decisions and actions should be based on that commitment to meeting the needs of the most vulnerable, powerless participant—the child.

Principle 4: Communication, Honesty, and Truthfulness

Social workers helping clients to navigate the waters of open adoption must commit themselves to full and complete honesty among the participants. “Secrecy and deception impair openness. Open adoption participants should be forthright with one another and avoid all misrepresentation.” This includes being honest with the reality of the type of structural openness arrangements one can honor and in sharing information that is important for each partner to know.

The ethical considerations in this handout are adapted from two sources:

From Reamer and Siegal
Ibid.
Ibid.
ADOPTION ETHICS CASE STUDIES

Case A—Public Agency Adoption

County A has two brothers, ages four and six, in foster care. The boys, Eddie and Tommy, have been in foster care 18 months and have been with the same foster family during that time.

Birth Family
The birth mother abuses a variety of substances, including alcohol and cocaine; she has been in and out of treatment numerous times. She acknowledges that she is unable to care for the children at this point but has been unwilling to sign a voluntary surrender of parental rights. When she visits the boys, she assures them they will be able to live with her again at some point in the future. Eddie and Tommy have different fathers; paternity of the younger child has never been established, and the father of the older child died following a drug-related shooting.

Adoptive Family
The foster family is very interested in adopting the boys. They currently dread visits with the birth mother as the boys have behavioral issues both before and after visits. They would prefer an adoption with no face-to-face contact with the birth mother following termination of her parental rights.

Agency
The caseworker would like to pursue a non-adversarial adoption with the birth mother signing a voluntary termination of her parental rights. The worker promises the birth mother continued post-adoption contact if she signs a voluntary surrender; the worker adds there will be no post-adoption contact if the birth mother forces the agency to file for a permanent custody order. Further, the worker tells the foster family they must agree to a fully open adoption, in spite of their reservations about contact, in order to proceed with adopting Eddie and Tommy.

Issues

1. What are the ethical dilemmas involved in this situation?

2. If the birth mother signs a voluntary surrender and the foster parents proceed with adoption as directed by the agency, how do you think this openness arrangement will impact all triad members?

3. How would you guide the participants in ethical decision-making regarding openness?
Case B—Private Agency Adoption

Kidwell, a private adoption agency, is providing birth parent counseling to a young woman who is in her eighth month of pregnancy. The birth mother has indicated her desire to place the child in a fully disclosed adoption with ongoing contact, and she has indicated her desire to choose the adoptive family.

**Birth Family**
The birth mother is a 24-year old woman who has not divulged the name of the birth father. She states the birth father is “unknown;” in reality, he is a married man with three children, and he is unaware of this pregnancy. The birth mother is being treated for Bipolar Disorder. She disclosed this information to the caseworker. However, the caseworker, concerned that this would impact the child's “adoptability,” did not record the information.

**Adoptive Family**
Prospective adoptive parents for Kidwell are given little training about openness in adoption during the pre-placement phase. They are told during the pre-service training that the agency promotes openness in adoption, but they are given little rationale for this practice and no guidance about decision-making regarding openness. Prospective adoptive parents are likewise given little information about adoption communication with the child about the birth family or about the adoption itself.

**Agency**
The caseworker fears prospective adoptive parents may not agree to adopt this child or agree to openness in the adoption if they are aware of the birth mother's mental health history.

Kidwell believes strongly that birth parents should be empowered to choose the adoptive family for their child. However, the agency very selectively only shows the birth parent one adoptive family profile at a time. If placement with the first family is rejected by the birth parent, the agency provides another profile (again selectively) for the birth parent’s consideration, and so on.

**Issues**

1. What are the ethical dilemmas involved in this situation?

2. How might these dilemmas be managed?

3. How would you guide the openness decisions in this case to best meet the needs of the child?
Values Based Open Adoption

Adapted from *The Spirit of Open Adoption* by Jim Gritter

Every adoption plan must:

Φ **Honor the adoptee.** Every child deserves to be honored as a unique gift. The needs of the adoptee are paramount.

Φ **Be based on candor.** Accurate information equips people for effective living. Adoptees need honesty if they are to integrate their past with their present and future. Adoptive parents need to have access to information as the child needs it, and birth parents need to be able to share information as their own situation, medical history, etc. change. Candor, which is beyond honesty, and speaks of transparency, produces the best results when it is coupled with kindness.

Φ **Be based on choices.** People take responsibility for decisions when they freely choose from real alternatives. Conversely, people tend to resent outcomes that result from coercion. Choices are often limited by circumstances, particularly in those situations in which parental rights are involuntarily terminated. Within realistic limits, adoption assessors must preserve the right of the parent to make whatever choices they can for the future of their children, even if they are able to be the parenting figure in the future of that child.

Φ **Honor the pain.** Adoption has a tragic element that cannot be ignored. All triad members experience loss. The adopted person loses his birth family, cultural heritage, relationships with significant others in his life. The birth parent loses his/her child, role as a parent (primary attachment figure and decision-maker for the child), and, perhaps, the esteem of family and friends who do not support the adoption. The adoptive parent loses the “dream child”, the ability to produce a child who is biologically related, and, often, the sense that he/she is the REAL parent.
Φ **Be covenantal.** The quality of the adoption will depend on the integrity the participants bring to their commitments.

Φ **Transform.** Adoption is a life-altering experience for each person involved. Adoption affects the lives of all triad members permanently.

Φ **Be adaptable.** Adoptive relationships are dynamic; never stagnate. All human relationships involve some hard work and conflict.

Φ **Build community.** Adoption is best understood as a system. Each participant affects and is affected by the others in the extended adoptive clan.
A Journey of Open Adoption in Child Welfare

The Case History

Emily’s History: Emily entered adoptive home as foster child at six months. She was adopted at 14 months old. In spite of her mother’s drinking and drug history, Emily was born healthy and well. She is biracial living in a predominantly white community in the northeast section of Ohio. Her birthmother is Caucasian. Her birthfather is African-American.

Birthmother’s History: Alison, Emily’s birthmother, was 20 years old when she found out she was pregnant. Alison had a tumultuous childhood, raised by alcoholic parents. She left home at 17 and became addicted to drugs and alcohol. She was homeless at the time Emily was born, prompting involvement from the local children services agency. Because of her drug addiction, mental health issues and refusal to participate, Alison failed to complete the reunification plan and Emily was freed for adoption.

Birthfather’s History: Shawn, Emily’s birthfather, who is African American, also experienced a difficult growing up and ended up on the same path as did her birth mother. Shortly before her birth, he left the area. No information about him is available.

Adoptive Family: Don and Martha were experienced adoptive parents when Emily joined their family. Beth was four years older than Emily. However, at the time of their adoption little adoption education was available, especially related to Emily’s cultural needs. Don and Martha did the best they knew how to do at the time.
Scenario One:

Age: 4

**EVENT:** Bubbly, energetic Emily is excited. Today is her birthday. She will finally be four. Also, something else is about to happen. Today her birthmother, Alison, will be coming to her party. Emily has heard of Alison all of her young life. Emily has talked with Alison on the phone, and now she is coming in person. The day goes exactly as planned. Alison, rather nervous and shy, comes in quietly and gives Emily a hug. She stays long enough to have cake and ice cream and then slips out.

The next day, Alison stops by the house to ask a question. “May I take Emily out to lunch at McDonald’s by myself?” Martha, Emily’s adoptive mother responded, “Let me think about it. Give me a call on Friday morning.”

After Alison leaves, Emily approaches her mother. She has overheard Alison’s request. She quietly asks her mother, “If I go to McDonald’s with Alison, can you and Beth (her older sister) come, too?”

Please discuss these questions:

1. **What adoption issues might be triggered?**
2. **What other feelings and thoughts might Emily have?**
3. **What behaviors might you see in Emily as she deals with this challenge?**
4. **What challenges will the adoptive parents encounter?**
5. **What challenges will the birth parent encounter?**
Scenario Two:

Age: 7

Event: Alison, Emily's birthmother has been part of her life now for over three years. Emily sees her about once a month or so. On this particular occasion, the whole family is camping, and Alison is invited out to the campsite for dinner. After dinner, Alison and Emily take a walk around the campground. During the walk, Emily asks her birthmother a question. “Alison,” she says, “why did you give me away?” Alison responds, “Emily, no one can just give a child away. There were a lot of things wrong in my life at that time.”

“I know, that is what my mom told me,” Emily counters. “But why did you give me away?”

Please discuss these questions:

1. What adoption issues might be triggered?
2. What other feelings and thoughts might Emily have?
3. What behaviors might you see in Emily as she deals with this challenge?
4. What challenges will the adoptive parents encounter?
5. What challenges will the birth parent encounter?
Scenario Three:  

Age 10

Event: Beth, Alison, and Emily enjoy doing things together occasionally. Alison has been part of Emily’s life for six years.

On this particular evening, the three of them have just returned from the movies. When they return home, Beth jumps out of the car and scoots into the house. Emily lingers a few moments.

“Alison, I need to ask you a question. Is my birthfather Black? When can I meet him? Does he want to see me? Why doesn’t he ever call? Who else in your family is Black?”

Alison has avoided any reference or conversation about Emily’s birth father. She has been dreading the moment that this question would come up because she will have to tell Emily that her birth father died.

“Yes, Emily, your birthfather was Black. He came from a big family with lots of brothers and sisters. They don’t live around here. The reason that he doesn’t call is that he died a few years ago.”

Emily grows quiet and opens the door to get out of the car. “Oh,” she whispers. “I just wanted to see someone I looked like.”

Emily never tells her mother about this conversation. Alison mentions it a few days later, in a casual conversation with Martha, Emily’s adoptive mom.

Please discuss these questions:

1. What adoption issues might be triggered?
2. What other feelings and thoughts might Emily have?
3. What behaviors might you see in Emily as she deals with this challenge?
4. What challenges will the adoptive parents encounter?
5. What challenges will the birth parent encounter?
Scenario Four:

Age 16

EVENT: Up to age 10, Emily has had an ongoing relationship with her birthmother. Around the time of Emily’s 11th birthday, Alison, her birthmother met someone, married, and moved away. Alison’s contacts with Emily became less frequent. By the time she was 12, Alison had completely cut off any contact.

Emily’s 16th birthday has just passed. One evening she comes in after school to hear the news that Alison has just called. She hasn’t heard from her in four years. Emily grabs the note from her dad and runs to her room.

“If she thinks I am going to call her back, “Emily shouts as she races up the stairs, “she is crazy.”

Please discuss these questions:

1. What adoption issues might be triggered?
2. What other feelings and thoughts might Emily have?
3. What behaviors might you see in Emily as she deals with this challenge?
4. What challenges will the adoptive parents encounter?
5. What challenges will the birth parent encounter?
THE EMOTIONAL JOURNEY OF OPEN ADOPTION

By Bobbi Grubb

Bobbi Grubb is an adoption advocate, counselor and speaker. She is the author of *Masterpiece of Joy: From the Despair of Infertility to the Joy of Adoption*. The book is available through the publisher at [www.outskirtspress.com/masterpieceofjoy](http://www.outskirtspress.com/masterpieceofjoy) as well as many online booksellers. Bobbi enjoys receiving e-mails from her readers at bobbi.grubb@cox.net.

Open adoption was the journey we traveled to realize our dreams. It was a journey that brought us from the depths of despair to the pinnacle of joy. In the years prior to our first adoption, we had experienced a variety of emotional challenges—frustration, disbelief, sorrow, bitterness and anger. Finally there came a reluctant acceptance and a spark of hope for the future. Over the years, we had learned to deal with all of these emotions. We felt we were emotionally prepared for anything else that could come our way. We were mistaken! Open adoption placed us on a road of constant conflicting emotions—something we never anticipated. There was caution in the midst of eager optimism, doubt in the midst of certainty, calm in the face of fear, and heart-wrenching sorrow in the midst of overwhelming joy.

After experiencing a decade of infertility tests, medications and surgeries, we were unable to conceive a child and achieve our heartfelt desire to become parents. Our diagnosis was ambiguous and frustrating—“unexplained infertility.” We had lost the infertility battle, so we changed our strategy and marched forward into the unknown arena of adoption. When our journey began, it was in the early 1990’s. Semi-open or open adoption was a relatively new phenomenon. We pored over books on the subject; we spoke to other couples; and we carefully analyzed the options. Following this research, we knew semi-open or open adoption was the road we would travel.

There were many reasons we chose this option. Most importantly, we wanted our child’s birthparent(s) to have enough information about us to make an informed decision. We wanted them to have complete peace with their choice. We desired to share with them how much we respected them for making such a courageous decision. And we wanted to have as much information as we could get to share with our child in the years to come. We looked forward to ongoing contact so the birthparent(s) would never have to agonize over the whereabouts or well being of their child. Following all of our investigation, we knew this type of adoption would present unique challenges, and we were prepared for the criticism of friends and family. However, none of our research equipped us to deal with the deep emotional conflicts to come.

“You’ve been chosen!” Those were the words we longed to hear. When the call came from the adoption agency, we were elated. We asked lots of questions. We took meticulous notes. Things were looking quite positive, and we were thrilled and hopeful. However, we clearly
understood we had to be cautious. We had been through a failed adoption already, so we knew another heartbreak was possible. We lived in Ohio. The agency was in Oklahoma; and the birthparents that selected us were in Oklahoma as well. The agency suggested a conference call with the birthparents and us. We were agreeable to this, but we really wanted to meet this couple, to open our hearts to them, and to make certain this was the right decision for all of us. We arranged to fly to Oklahoma three days later. We all thought there was plenty of time as the baby was not due for three more weeks.

In those three days prior to that meeting, the doubts and uncertainties began to plague our every thought. What if we spent the money to travel to Oklahoma, and the birthparents didn’t like us? What should we say to them? Should we be reserved and unemotional, or down to earth and transparent? What should we wear? What if we established a great relationship, then they changed their minds later? Could we handle this? The questions kept coming. They came from friends and family. And they came from within us. A closed adoption would not cause so much stress. Were we doing the right thing? In spite of all these doubts, we were certain this was the right thing to do. We pushed the reservations aside and moved forward.

The day of the meeting finally arrived, and we were a bundle of nerves. From the moment the birthparents entered the office, we felt a kinship with them. They shared their story, and we shared ours. Though we tried to stifle our emotions, it was impossible as we shared the despair of infertility, the failed adoption and our hope for the future. When the birthmother asked me to be present at the baby’s birth, I completely lost my composure. She couldn’t have known, but this was my deepest personal desire. Though I didn’t see how it would be possible, I had thought of it every day for months and months.

Following this meeting, we were feeling very optimistic. Later that day our birthmother visited her doctor and he felt the delivery would be within a week. Now we had some serious decisions to make. My dream of witnessing the birth of our child might be within reach, but I certainly had to remain in Oklahoma for this to transpire. My husband and I both had pressing obligations in our jobs back home. We took care of things at home to the best of our ability and remained in Oklahoma for another week of emotional ups and downs. Were we finally going to be parents, or were we in for a week of anxiety and doubts to be followed by a huge disappointment?

Exactly one week later, the phone call finally came. She was in labor. We rushed to the hospital wondering what the day would bring. The adoption coordinator met us at the hospital entrance and rushed me into the delivery room. I was the only person present to coach the birthmother through the delivery. I was quite frightened. I had no idea what to do or say. As I stood by her side, I was overwhelmed with many emotions—anticipation, happiness and amazement, among others. However, I was almost physically sick myself and wrought with feelings of guilt as I witnessed her physical pain and knew she was enduring all of this that we might become parents. In the midst of her most difficult labor, she asked me to sing to her. With tears streaming down my face, I did so. This entire experience established an incredible and indescribable bond between us. I will always be grateful for that wonderful experience, though my emotional well being suffered greatly that day and in the days to come.

We remained in the hospital for two days. We spent hours with the baby and the
birthmother. And we shared very intimate special moments with her. We grew to admire, respect and love her deeply. We wanted to take this precious child home with us more than anything, to experience the joys of parenthood after all these years. But we knew it was going to be intensely painful for the birthmother, who obviously loved her son with all her heart. We knew she could still change her mind, and we encouraged her to do so if she felt this was the right thing to do. Our joy would be her sorrow—or vice versa. If she chose to parent, her happiness would be our extreme disappointment.

The morning arrived when the final decision had to be made. Of course we didn’t want her to change her mind, and we didn’t really think she would. However, we knew she might. In a convoluted way, that might have alleviated some of the guilt we were experiencing. We were physically sick due to the overpowering feelings of sorrow and guilt on behalf of the birthmother. We loved her so much; we weren’t sure we could take that precious baby and leave her alone in her despair. As I sobbed into the arms of my husband and the adoption counselor, the counselor assured me this was what she wanted. It was what she chose. She wanted me to be this baby’s mother. And that made me cry even more. What an honor it was! We left the hospital that morning totally depleted emotionally and physically. In our arms was that precious bundle of joy who is now our 13-year old son.

The emotional turmoil did not end there. We received heart-wrenching letters from the birthmother on a regular basis. Though she did not doubt her decision, she shared her feelings with us openly. She spoke of dreaming about him and awakening to the scent of him in the room. She spoke of missing him sit up, roll over, and take his first steps. All of these beautiful thoughts again brought our sorrow for her to the surface. It was such a difficult thing to look upon the angelic face of our son, to experience the long-awaited thrill of parenting and know his birthmother was hurting and grieving every day.

We made a trip to Oklahoma two years later and had a joyful reunion. She was thrilled to see our son toddling around, happy and healthy. For personal reasons, she decided shortly thereafter to sever the communication we had shared for so long. This was another emotional jolt for us. We knew we would miss her, but we also knew we would honor her request as she moved on to another chapter in her life.

We learned much from this first open adoption experience. Our second son joined our family almost six years later. The story is as wonderful and touching as the first. We love our youngest son’s birth family deeply, and we maintain contact as I write this eight years later. Yet the second open adoption did not take the physical and emotional toll on us. We were prepared emotionally. We knew what to expect; and we shared what was coming with the birth family from the very beginning.

Open adoption is truly an amazing and conflicting emotional journey. There are few events in life that bring more overwhelming joy than the birth of a child. There are few events in life that bring more despair than the loss of a child. Open adoption deals with these events in a very up-close and personal way. Agonizing joy—an apt description of the open adoption experience.
OPEN ADOPTION PERSPECTIVES

Inside an Open Adoption from an Adoptive Parent’s Perspective

by Jayne Schooler

This is true story, adapted for use in this workshop

Emily Naber, now 13 shared some of her thoughts and feelings about growing up in an open adoption in the accompanying article. The following response comes from her mom, Martha Naber, who adds to Emily’s perspective.

How and why did you decide to have openness in your adoption?

Martha: Actually, it was Emily’s birth mother who requested it and in 1985 that was quite new practice for workers in Maine. I met Emily for the first time at her foster home. We feel in love with this beautiful four-month-old immediately and were told that the adoptive parents would have to be willing to have some openness at the birthmother’s request. We agreed. Also, I am the type of person who wanted to say thank you. We had waited so long for this adoption.

What did the birth mother request?

Martha: She didn’t want our names or addresses, or anything identifying like that. She just wanted to meet us and see us and know that her daughter would grow up in a home and have the things she never had – like grandparents and cousins. We met her one week after Emily came to us and had subsequent contact through the agency.

When did you decide that perhaps a more open relationship might be possible?

Martha: I came home from an open adoption workshop held in Maine with Jim Gritter and decided that is what I wanted for Emily. I called the agency, and the arrangements were made. We met with Alison (the birthmother), our worker, and her therapist to work out the details. I can remember saying to her, ‘I don’t want to look out my window and see you parked across the street.’ At the end of that first meeting, we hugged, and I gave her our name, address and phone number.

What have been particularly difficult challenges for you?

Martha: I can think of three areas that have involved a process and challenge for us. The first challenge was trying to develop a trusting relationship with a stranger. We didn’t know what we could count on. Alison, who already had trust issues from her past, didn’t know she could trust us, either. In fact, she told us that she never expected me to really call after the first meeting.

A second task is being clear about boundaries. Alison had to understand whose responsibility it was to make decisions – who really is the parent. She has always respected those issues.

A third area of challenge and responsibility is crucial to the on-going healthy emotional development for Emily. It is to keep her the focus of these
relationships. The focus is not the birth mother’s needs or ours. If Emily wants a visit, that is ok. If she doesn’t, that is ok, too. Decisions around contact must be made with her best interest in mind.

What have been particular benefits?
Martha: Our experience has been very positive. I know that some of the benefits help Alison, but more so, Emily. For one thing, Emily can talk directly to the person who made this decision. She doesn’t have to go through anyone. She also has access to another person who cares about her, and Alison loves her. She gets to spend time with half-siblings who also adore her. Another benefit is that the gap of biological connectedness isn’t there. She has connection with her birth mother, and that is ok. Emily knows that we are not in competition for her affection. She is deeply attached to us and sees us as her parents.

What advice would you give to parents considering an open adoption?

Martha: If adoptive parents want to maintain an open adoption, they must have good listening skills. I can remember early on in the relationship with Alison that she wanted to take Emily to McDonald’s by herself. I think she was about 5. Emily asked me, “When Alison takes me to McDonald’s, you and Elizabeth are going to, aren’t you?” What that said to me was that Emily wasn’t ready to do this alone. Alison didn’t take her that time because she had wanted her alone. As Emily grew up and understood more, she was ready and anxious to spend time with Alison.

Another important piece of advice I can give is to keep your expectations realistic. I had hopes that certain things would happen for Emily’s sake, but not high expectations. It takes patience to allow the relationships to evolve without a lot of demands or expectations.

As a professional, what personal characteristics do you see in adoptive parents that create healthy open adoption relationships?
Martha: I can think of several that are important. One of the primary characteristics is that adoptive parents have confidence in their own parenting abilities and styles. They do not need to always second-guess themselves about discipline or boundary setting. Another characteristic that is helpful is that these parents need to be able to take risks. Open adoption relationships require risk taking. Adoptive parents with these on-going relationships need to be able to function without all the answers up-front and clear. You don’t know all the answers when it comes to working out these types of arrangements. A final characteristic is that these adoptive parents are aware of and sensitive to the core issues of adoption that impacts not only their child, but the birth mother as well. Open adoption does not eradicate the grief, loneliness, and guilt for these birthmothers. It eases loss issues, but does not erase them.

(A note about Don and Martha. Don has served on the faculty of the University of Maine, teaching microbiology. Martha was the Director of Educational Services for International Adoption Services Centre, Gardiner, Maine. Their eldest daughter, Elizabeth, also has met her birth mother, but due to distance and other circumstances, contact is currently on-going through e-mail.)
OPEN ADOPTION PERSPECTIVES

Inside an Open Adoption from a Child’s Perspective

by Jayne Schooler

(The following article appeared in the July/August 1998 issues of Adoptive Families Magazine. Used by permission.)

Some say it will never work. Some say don’t even try. Still others say it isn’t worth the effort. What are they referring to? Maintaining an open adoption with a birth mother that wanted it that way. Why was this usual? The birth mother came through the public system and the child through foster care.

For the Nabers, Don, Martha, and Emily, their open adoption experience is working. They wouldn’t have it any other way. For this column, Emily agreed to answer questions and share her thoughts about her adoption experience. In the accompanying article, her adoptive mother, Martha Naber, will share her perspective on being inside of an open adoption with a early adolescent and her birth mother.

A little about Emily…..
Emily just turned 13 years old this past spring. She is the daughter of Don and Martha Naber and the younger sister of Elizabeth. The Nabers live in central Maine. Emily is bright, inquisitive, and her parent’s joy. She is quite the typical early adolescent interested in things like dance, talking on the phone, gymnastics, talking on the phone, getting her hair to look just right, and talking on the phone.

Emily entered her adoptive home at the age of four months. Her mother first met her when she visited the foster home where Emily lived and felt an immediate connection. The family’s journey with open adoption has indeed been that – a journey, a process. So what does Emily have to say?

What is your first memory of meeting your birth mother?
Emily: It seems that I have always known Alison as my birth mother. I met her when I was three. I know that my parents invited to her my birthday party when I turned four. She gave me a dress and a big black doll. I guess that would probably be the first clear memory I have.

How often do you see or talk to her?
Emily: I usually see or talk to her three or four times a month. I call her to see what she is doing and to see if it is a good time to come over. When we are
together we watch TV, play on the computer and talk. One of the most favorite things I like Alison to do is to braid my hair and she likes to do it, too. I also get to visit with my two half sisters and half-brother that live with her. I also invite her to school concerts and my dance recitals.

**Is it a problem for you that your half-siblings live with your birth mother and you do not?**

Emily: My friends sometimes ask me that. Because both my parents and my birth mother talk to me about the reason for my adoption, it isn’t hard. I understand that my birth mother was very young when I was born and she wasn’t able to care for me like a baby should be cared for. When the others were born, she was a lot older and much more able to take care of them. I really do understand the difference of the time periods in my birth mother’s life.

**What has been difficult for you about your relationship with your birth mother?**

Emily: Really, there haven’t been a whole lot of problems. My birth mother is sick a lot and that is hard because when she is sick, I am not able to see her.

**What has been good for you about this relationship?**

Emily: Getting to see my birth mother and spending time with her is important to me. It gave me a chance to really ask her what happened. She tells me what it was like to be very young and a single mom. She has always said that she wanted me to have a better home than she did. If I have a question about my birth family, my mom always tells me to ask Alison. Since I get to talk to her and see her, I know I can get my questions answered from the person who would have the answers. I just don’t have to guess about it.

**How do you explain your birth mother to your friends?**

Emily: Most of my friends I have known since I was in second grade and they already know who she is. Sometimes a new friend might ask me and sometimes I tell them who she is and sometimes I just say that she is my mom’s friend. It just kind of depends on who is asking.

**Can you imagine for a moment what it would be like to not know your birth mother?**

Emily: That is pretty hard to do because I have always known her. I guess I would be confused and have a lot of questions that my mom couldn’t answer. I just know that I wouldn’t want anything to be different than the ways things are for me.
Choosing an open adoption relationship requires special skills and abilities on the part of both birth parents and adoptive parents. The key element in facilitating open adoption is the preparation of the birth and prospective adoptive parents. The time period available to prepare the participants in an individual adoption plan may vary from months to days. The role of the adoption professional/assessor is to serve as the navigator, not the captain of the plan. The assessor offers the “map,” but the parties choose the direction, route, and speed of the plan. As an assessor, it is important develop a good solid map to prepare for the adoption experience. The following is a list of areas to include in the preparation plan/map.
I. Assessment

At the outset of adoption planning, the worker must have an understanding of key factors that must be considered when facilitating an openness adoption arrangement, specifically child welfare foster-to-adopt arrangements.

During this assessment period, workers should be aware of basic characteristics of adoptive parents who have been successful with the open adoption experience. These characteristics include:

A. **CONFIDENCE**: Adoptive parents have confidence in their own parenting abilities and styles. They do not need to always second-guess themselves about discipline or boundary setting.

B. **RISK TAKING**: Adoptive parents are able to take risks. Open adoption relationships require risk taking. Adoptive parents with these on-going relationships need to be able to function without all the answers "up-front" and clear. It is impossible to know all the answers when it comes to working out these types of arrangements.

C. **SENSITIVITY**: Adoptive parents are aware of and sensitive to the core issues of adoption that impacts not only their child, but the birth mother as well. Open adoption does not eradicate the grief, loneliness and guilt for these birthmothers. It can ease feelings of loss, but does not erase them.

A critical component of the Assessment Phase is the consideration of the cultural needs of the birth and adoptive families. Workers should discuss with the parties their family’s attitudes, values and beliefs relative to privacy, family relationships, the importance of family history and ancestry. This will assist the worker in developing and facilitating a plan for
open adoption that is compatible with the birth and adoptive families’ cultural norms. This increases the likelihood of success and decreases the risk of crisis.

Workers involved in open adoption relationships with older child adoption should be aware during this assessment period of their role in the plan. Workers should guide a visitation plan to benefit all members of the triad:

- Who should be in contact with the child?
- How often should they be in contact?
- What is the nature of the contact?
- What support services do all members of the triad need?
- What will be the ongoing role of the worker, if any?

II. The Education Plan
Part of facilitation of openness in adoption is the educational plan that is developed for the families involved. Educational activities can be divided into two different categories:

A. Group Learning Activities – This aspect of training can include the following information for families:

1) Introduce basic adoption education
   - Present language of adoption
   - Instruct on concept of openness
   - Present language of open adoption

2) Introduce adoptive parent and/or birth parent involved in an open arrangement
   - Communicate skills on dealing with attitudes within family/community regarding adoption in general and open adoption

B. Individual Learning Activities – This aspect of training is tailored to meet the needs of each individual adoptive family. These activities can include:

- Give recommended reading lists
- Encourage a visit to an adoptive support group
and adult adoptee support group

- Recommend videos such as *Immediate Family* and *Losing Isaiah*

The worker should select educational activities that are compatible with the parent’s culture. For example, a parent’s values and beliefs may discourage the sharing of personal information to anyone outside the family system. Group learning activities would not be effective and, in fact, would be stressful to that person. Individual learning activities may be more appropriate and effective.

### III. Decision Making

Decision-making is an important aspect of the facilitation of open adoption relationships. In many cases, families who come to adoption through infertility come with damaged decision making skills. Part of the worker’s job is to help the family repair their damaged decision making abilities. This is done by:

- Helping the family to see themselves as parents, not as an infertile couple
- Not making the decisions for couples at a pressure point
- Reinforcing their decision making by asking “What do you want?” “What do you need?”

### IV. Relationship Building

Open adoption is a relationship, pure and simple. The nature of the relationship will vary as greatly as the individuals involved. Factors such as culture, family history, and gender will impact how relationships are formed and maintained. The worker’s role is first to prepare the parties for the time of the initial meeting. It is somewhat like helping a friend to get ready for a blind date:

- How to make a good impression
- What to talk about
- What if I’m asked a question I’m not prepared to answer
- Where do we meet--what is a "safe" place
- What if I don’t like them
- Anticipation of questions
Also like a blind date, open relationships may fizzle or take off after the initial "date" or meeting. If the relationship starts to grow and evolve, the worker should be there to assist in answering questions, be a sounding board or consultant.

The worker is not supposed to be the glue that bonds the relationship but the temporary support to enable the bonding to occur. The ultimate goal for an open relationship should be for the parties involved to maintain a positive relationship without the assistance of the worker. Communication is key to any successful relationship. Cultural differences in communication styles and behaviors can lead to misunderstanding and misinterpretation on the part of birth and/or adoptive parents. The worker should be able to determine problem areas that are communication difficulties.

Once communication difficulties are identified the worker may address these with the birth parents and adoptive parents to work toward improving the communication. The worker should also be able to remind and reassure the parties that some relationships are not workable/acceptable for parties. Open adoption is a life-long commitment. That is a long time to be in a relationship that is not a positive experience. It is the best interests of everyone, especially the child, that this is addressed prior to entering a permanent relationship.
Questions for Birth Parents – A Self-Assessment

The following are questions to ask yourself concerning your adoption decision. You can discuss your answers with your worker.

1) Why am I choosing adoption?

2) How do I define open adoption?

3) What do I want in an adoption?

4) What do I want for my child in an adoption?

5) What are my major concerns and fears about this open adoption?
6) What is my vision for my open adoption in the...
   • First year
   • Five years from now
   • Ten years from now?

7) What qualities do I hope for in an adoptive parent?
Questions for Adoptive Parents – A Self-Assessment
(Infant Placement)

The following are questions to ask yourself concerning your adoption decision. You can discuss your answers with your worker.

1. Why am I choosing adoption?

2. How do I define open adoption?

3. What do I want in an adoption?

4. What do I want for my child in an adoption?

5. What are my major concerns and fears about this open adoption?
6. What is my vision for my open adoption in the...
   - First year
   - Five years from now
   - Ten years from now?

7. What qualities do I hope for in a birth parent?
Questions for Adoptive Parents – A Self-Assessment
(Special Needs/Older Child Placement)

The following are questions to ask yourself concerning your adoption decision. You can discuss your answers with your worker.

1. Why am I choosing adoption?

2. How do I define open adoption?

3. What do I want in an adoption?

4. What do I want for my child in an adoption?

5. What are my major concerns and fears about this open adoption?
6. What is my vision for my open adoption in the...
   • First year
   
   • Five years from now
   
   • Ten years from now?

7. What qualities do I hope for in a birth parent?
Open Adoption Issues and Questions for Special Needs/ Older Children Adoptive Parents

(These issues/questions should be discussed with the adoptive parents)

During the initial home study and pre-finalization period, the worker should focus on the family’s willingness and ability to acknowledge and explore adoption issues, both personally and with others.

a. How open is the family to examine their motivation for adoption?

b. How comfortable is the family with the similarities and differences created by adoptive family life as compared to biological parenting?

c. How willing and able is the family to discuss difficult and emotionally charged issues related to their child’s past. How have the parents discussed other sensitive or difficult topics within the family?

d. How well does the adoptive family understand the child’s need to feel some level of connection to the birth family? (That connection may not be physical, but emotional through communication. Parents must always remember that for a child to develop a healthy sense of value, they need to feel valued – even from the birth parents who did not or could not care for them)  

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e. How have the parents handled the discussion around dealing with difficult relatives?

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Additional Behavioral Questions to Ask Specifically

a. Give an example of a time that you have had to choose to meet the needs of a child (or someone else) over the needs or demands of another. What did you do and how did it work out?

b. Tell me about a time where you had experienced rejection from someone in whom you have invested a lot of time. What was the reason for the rejection (loyalty to another)? What did you do, and how did it work out? (This question addresses the parent’s ability to deal with the child’s rejecting behavior due to birth parent loyalties.)

c. Give examples of how you have helped a child (or another person) through a major disappointment. What did you do and how did it work out? (This question addresses the parent’s ability to deal with a child’s pain as a result of missed contacts.)

d. How have you managed boundary issues with your extended family and close friends? What have been instances of boundary violation and what did you do? How did it work out? (This addresses the parent’s ability as the adoptive family to establish boundaries and guidelines.)
Mediation

The mediator guides the disputing parties through a step-by-step problem-solving process designed to help them resolve the conflict:

**Step 1: Defining the Problem**

The mediator’s first task is to understand, and help the parties to understand, the exact nature of their conflict. The mediator asks each person to explain what the other has been doing or saying to give rise to the conflict, and the specific effects—emotional and otherwise—that those behaviors have had on the speaker and/or on others.

As the parties tell their stories, the mediator helps them to communicate productively by using active listening skills through the following:

- concentrate full attention on the speaker
- maintain eye contact and body language to convey that attention
- ask clarifying questions
- summarize

Active listening not only helps the speaker to feel heard and understood, it also helps ensure that the mediator is accurately and completely understanding the speaker’s perspective on the conflict. This is important, because until both sides feel that their concerns have been heard and understood they will not be ready to move forward in their efforts to resolve the conflict.

Once all parties have had the opportunity to speak, the
mediator pinpoints the specific areas of disagreement--i.e. the issues--that will need to be negotiated.

**Step 2: Identifying Underlying Interests**

Once the perspectives of all parties have been shared and the issues identified, the mediator begins to broaden the possibilities for resolving the conflict by moving the parties beyond the accusations and demands that have characterized their conflict thus far. The mediator does this by guiding the parties through a discussion of the underlying interests that are driving the conflict.

The interests of the parties are simply the need, desires, concerns, and fears that are motivating their behavior and demands.

For example, a birth mother complains that the adoptive parents have been refusing to accept her phone calls, in violation of the agreement they made prior to placement. Not accepting the birth parent's calls is the behavior that gave rise to the conflict. The underlying interest motivating the adoptive parents' behavior may be a desire for predictability in the timing of those calls, or a need to protect their child from being frightened or confused, or by any of a number of other interests.

Using the same example, the adoptive parents indicate that the birth parent repeatedly calls their home at all hours of the day and night, seeking information about the child that she relinquished for adoption. The birth mother's behavior is making phone calls at all hours. That behavior might be motivated by an interest in flexibility regarding the timing of phone calls due to an unpredictable work schedule, in preserving her link with the adopted child, in avoiding worry about the health and well-being of the child, etc.
Although present in every conflict, these underlying interests are not always obvious. They're often camouflaged behind accusations, threats, beliefs (assumptions), and values. It takes thought, and practice, to identify them. A simple tool that the mediator can use to identify interests is to ask "Why?" In the above example, the mediator might ask the adoptive parents: "Why are you not accepting the phone calls?" The mediator is looking for the underlying reasons (the interests) behind the adoptive parents' refusal to accept those phone calls.

The mediator's job is to listen for clues as to the parties' interests as they share their perspectives about the conflict during Step 1, and to articulate those interests for the parties during Step 2.

**Step 3: Facilitating Negotiations**

Once the mediator has articulated the parties' interests s/he is ready to begin to guide them through a negotiation process in which the parties seek to generate solutions which address the underlying interests of all parities.

One method frequently used by mediators to facilitate negotiations is the process of **brainstorming**. In brainstorming, the mediator helps the parties to generate as many solutions to the conflict as possible within a brief period of time, and then to evaluate those options one at a time, refining and combining them until a solution is achieved that works for everyone. Here's how the process works:

1. The mediator instructs the parties to rapidly suggest as many ideas as possible for resolving the conflict between them.

2. The mediator explains the brainstorming ground rules:
Everyone participates. Be creative—let your imagination run wild. No evaluating or criticizing one another's ideas.

3. The mediator records the parties' responses on a flip chart.

4. The mediator asks one party to identify their favorite idea.

5. The mediator asks that party why he or she thinks that his or her preferred solution is a good idea (looking for how/whether the preferred solution addresses the needs of both).

6. The mediator asks the second party what he or she likes and does not like about the first party's preferred solution.

7. If the second party rejects the first party's preferred solution, the mediator asks the second party if he or she can think of a way to modify that solution to make it more acceptable. If he or she can't think of a way to modify it, the mediator asks the second party to choose his or her own preferred solution from the brainstormed list and begin the evaluation process again. This process is repeated until mutually acceptable solution is achieved.

Step 4: Agreement

Once the parties have found a solution that appears to meet the underlying interest of all concerned, the mediator helps them to flesh out the details of how that solution will be implemented. The mediator helps the parties to answer the questions who, what, when, where, and how with regard to how every aspect of the agreement between the parties will be carried out. The mediator then writes up the agreement in clear, simple language that leaves no doubt as to the meaning and the intent of the parties.
CASE STUDIES: THE OPENNESS PUZZLE

Case Study: Valerie, age 11
Valerie is an 11-year-old female. Valerie’s foster parents are eager to adopt her. Valerie strongly desires to have a relationship with her birth family. Help her foster/adoptive parents to manage an open relationship.

Case Study: Baby Boy Turner (-2 months)
Baby Boy Turner will be born in two months. The pregnancy has progressed normally without medical risks or concerns.

Case Study: Abby, 2 months old
Abby is a two-month old infant without significant health problems. She is currently in foster care while being legally freed for adoption. She is making normal developmental progress.

Case Study: Jasmine, 7 years old
Jasmine was removed from her birth mother’s care when she was four and a half years old due to chronic neglect and suspected abuse. When Jasmine’s birth mother was notified that the agency was pursuing permanent custody, she told the social worker that she would “sign her over if I can have some say so about who adopts her.” The agency agreed. Help plan some form of openness for this family.

Case Study: Roberto, age 2 years
Roberto was severely neglected as a newborn and was diagnosed as failure to thrive. His birth mother has visited him faithfully every week but is incapable of completing her case plan. Roberto’s adoptive family has been selected, and he has been visiting them for the past two weeks. Assist both families in arranging an open relationship.
Discussion Questions for the Openness Puzzle

1. Give your birth mother a name.

2. What are the birth mother’s strengths?

3. What are the birth mother’s limitations?

4. What barriers/challenges do you see in facilitating any level of openness?

5. What are the cultural barriers in your situation that may impact the openness arrangement?

6. Looking at the structural open / openness continuum, what might you suggest for the initial plan in your case study? Why are you making that suggestion?

7. Are there any other factors you need to consider?
Six “W’s”
of Adoption Openness

Why the contact?

Who should be involved in the contact?

What type of contact should it be?

When should the contact occur?

Where should the direct contact happen?

What will be the process of mediation?
OPENNESS JEOPARDY QUESTIONS

Adoptalk

1. A family that talks openly of the birth parents, but has not met them would be an example of ...  
   a. Open communication  
   b. Structural openness  
   c. Psychological presence  

2. According to research, who is most influential in creating a healthy adoption communication environment in the home?  
   a. Father  
   b. Mother  
   c. Both share equally  

3. The birth parent, particularly the birth mother, is a powerful figure in the adoptive home, often even more so when the adoption is closed. This phenomenon is called:  
   a. Psychological presence  
   b. Anger management  
   c. Disengagement
4. An area to explore with prospective adoptive parents regarding adoption communication is:
   a. Which books about adoption they plan to purchase for their child
   b. The parents’ willingness and ability to acknowledge and explore adoption issues both personally and with others
   c. Whether the parents plan to inform the child’s teacher about the adoption

5. Adoptees can best integrate their past with their future if:
   a. They have accurate information about their histories
   b. They are protected from negative information about their birth families
   c. Adoption is discussed only when they ask questions about their birth parents

_Tier Review_

6. What year did adoption records close in Ohio?
   a. 1956
   b. 1974
   c. 1964

7. Honeymoon, ambivalence, reciprocal interactions, and bonding represent what in the life of an adoptive family?
   a. Stages of grief
   b. Stages of adjustment
   c. Stages of dissolution
8. Which is not a core issue of adoption?
   a. Loss
   b. Jealousy
   c. Divided loyalties
   d. Control
   e. Identity

9. Which of the following children would not qualify for a special needs definition under Title IV-E Adoption Assistance?
   a. An 11-year-old child
   b. A sibling group of three children
   c. A child with developmental delays
   d. None of the above

10. Which of the following is not one of the three factors that determine the level of crisis experienced by a child or family during a change in placement?
    a. Level of stress
    b. Ability to cope
    c. Number of pre-placement visits
    d. An accurate perception of the event
Pros and Cons

11. Research in adoption says that adoptive parents are dissatisfied by their level of openness due to the following reason:
   
a. Too much birth parent involvement
b. Birth parents fade out of the picture
c. Agency interference

12. Birth parents in closed adoption have reported few emotional or psychological implications as a result of their experience.
   
a. True
b. False

13. Factors which might indicate less openness within the adoptive relationship might include:
   
a. A birth parent who does not support the adoptive parents as the parents of the child
b. Adoptive parents who have difficulty drawing and maintaining clear boundaries
c. A child who is afraid of the birth parents
d. All of the above

14. What is a benefit of openness in adoption?
   
a. The adopted child receives “permission” from his birth parent to attach to the adoptive family.
b. The adoptive parents can get a child more quickly.
c. The birth parents can participate in parenting the child.
d. It’s less work for the Assessor.
15. Cultural differences between the birth and adoptive families that might positively or negatively impact their openness relationship might include:

a. Age  
b. Work schedule  
c. Socio-economic level  
d. A and C

**Openness Practice**

16. When birth parents and adoptive parents enter into an open adoption agreement, they have entered into an agreement that is legally binding in the State of Ohio.

a. True  
b. False

17. A family who has exchanged only first names and some information through a mediated plan is an example of...

a. Closed adoption  
b. Semi-open adoption  
c. Fully mediated adoption

18. Which best describes semi-open adoption?

a. Adoptive and birth families have met and exchanged identifying information and develop a plan for ongoing contact.

b. Birth mother chooses adoptive family. The two families agree to exchange first names and will exchange pictures and letters through an intermediary.

c. Birth parents and adoptive parents do not exchange any identifying information.
19. Which one is not a key factor to consider when assessing an adoptive parent’s ability to maintain an open adoption relationship?

   a. Educational level
   b. Cultural sensitivity
   c. Empathy and compassion
   d. Ability to set boundaries
   e. Emotional maturity

20. Promising a birth parent that he or she can maintain an ongoing open relationship with a child being placed for adoption constitutes what type of ethical dilemma in openness practice:

   a. Client self-determination
   b. Honesty
   c. Protection of the most vulnerable client
   d. Full disclosure regarding benefits and challenges of openness
   e. B and D
Opening a Closed Adoption

Ages 0-5

When opening an adoption for a preschool child, the major preparation work belongs to the adoptive parent.

There are four issues in preparing to open a closed adoption.

1. Describe and introduce the birth parent correctly
   Using the correct vocabulary regarding the birth parent is most desirable, according to Patricia Dorner, author of *How to Open an Adoption*. Small children can learn the correct words and begin to understand the meaning behind those words. Out of a pure motive, occasionally, adoptive parents will introduce the birth parents as an aunt or uncle, or just a family friend. According to Dorner, “to think of someone as an aunt and then discover that she is really one’s birthmother requires quite an emotional leap.”

2. Recognize the time factor
   Young children process time much differently than older children. Once the time of the visit has been scheduled, it is in the child’s best interest to avoid a major time delay from telling the child to the actual visit. Dorner suggests that sufficient time for a child this age is one or two days.

3. Select an informal setting
   Being confined to a sterile office conference room is not the ideal location for a visit with a child. A park or
another place where the child has space to move freely is preferred. Dorner suggests that some adoptive parents do feel comfortable in having the visit in their home, especially if there has been a reasonable amount of prior contact.

4. Talk through the anticipated visit
A young child will not be able to imagine exactly what to expect during this first visit. Dorner says that parents can ease some fears if they walk the child through the visit. The child can be told when they are going to get together, where it will happen, how the child might feel, and how long they will be there.

The conversation might go like this:

We’re going to get together with Jill tomorrow afternoon at Jolly Park. Mommy and Daddy will be there with you. You’ll have a chance to meet Jill and even play with her if you want to. Maybe you’ll want to hug her when you see her. If you do, go ahead. If you don’t, that’s O.K., too, We want you to be comfortable. We really love her and are excited about meeting her. We will probably stay together for about an hour and a half. That’s about as long as Sesame Street and Mr. Rogers.

What do you think? I want you to know that when we’re done visiting, you, Mommy and Daddy will come home together. Sometimes kids get nervous and it’s better if we talk about it. Let me know if you have any questions, O.K.? (Dorner, 1998)
Ages 6-12

When opening an adoption for a school-age child, much more preparation is needed. The following concerns emerge as part of the preparation process:

1. **Address expectations, fantasies, and feelings**
   School-age children are much more able to talk about their thoughts and feelings regarding the opening of a closed adoption. Parents should keep the conversations simple, says Dorner, but some issues must be approached:
   - Expectations that the contact will feel comfortable
   - Expectations that this will be a regular activity
   - Fantasies about moving home with them
   - Fantasies about being kidnapped by them
   - Divided loyalties; feeling love for birthparents and guilt for doing so
   - Feelings (unexpected) of sadness or anger

2. **Discussing the process of opening the adoption**
   Opening an adoption for a school-age child must happen in stages so that the child understands the process. Although children are impatient and perhaps might even pressure parents for immediate contact, Dorner says, “taking the time to get acquainted improves the chances of a long-term relationship” (Dorner, 1998). The steps most often found successful allow for all parties to process the intense emotions that emerge. These steps include letter writing, talking on the phone, and then eventually face-to-face contact. It is not unusual for these steps to take six months to a year before the first face-to-face meeting.
3. Prepare for the first face-to-face visit

If introductions through letters and phone calls have occurred, some familiarity will mark the first face-to-face meeting. Dorner recommends some tips for parents just prior to and during the visit and after the visit:

- Prepare the child for intense emotions
- Give them a tool for letting the parents know they wish to end the visit
- Plan the first visits for only one or two hours at a time
- Recognize a child this age will vacillate between enthusiasm and disinterest—this is developmentally normal

4. Deal with birth siblings still in the birth home

Occasionally, adopted children will meet birth siblings who are now in the home of their birth parents. Adoptive parents must realize that jealousy, sadness and anger about not being part of the birth family is a normal grief reaction. This does not signal that the child wants to move in with his birth family. Expressing support and empathy toward the adopted child will allow him to share his thoughts and feelings.

5. Process the reasons if delays prevent contact

On some occasions, birth families and adoptive families make contact, even exchange letters and pictures, and then all communication stops. Children will need help in understanding what happened. The following suggestions might aid parents in guiding their children through this hurtful circumstance:

- Birth mothers have trouble processing their feelings about the adoption
- Other birth family members may be
discouraging the contact

- Birth mothers who fail to respond to the first letter may be attempting to write the “perfect” letter

6. Be Aware of Cultural Issues

Birth and adoptive parents may represent different cultural perspectives: different socio-economic levels, different levels of education, different ethnicities or races, different ages, etc. All of these differences will create potential conflicts in how boundaries and privacy is handled, parenting practices, communication patterns, handling of grief related to adoption. If birth and adoptive parents can be coached to understand the cultural differences, they will be more successful in communicating effectively with a minimum of conflict.

Adolescents –

Opening contact between the adolescent and birth family has its own unique set of circumstances. The following are considerations to be examined by adoptive parents:

Is this issue important for teens?

First Signs of an Active Search

Do adolescents think about their birth history? Do they have an interest in meeting birth parents? The answer is yes to both questions according to the Search Institute's study Growing Up Adopted: A Portrait of Adolescents and Their Families, completed in the spring of 1994.

- Forty percent of the adolescents studied wanted to know more about their birth history (60% girls, 45% boys).
When asked if they had an interest in meeting their birth parents, about two-thirds (65%) responded affirmatively. The motivation for meeting birth parents varied:

- To find out what they look like (94%)
- To tell them I am happy (80%)
- To tell them I am okay (76%)
- To tell them I am glad to be alive (73%)
- To find out why I was adopted (72%)

When examining this list of motives, it appears that the desire to meet birth parents is more than an inquiry into personal history. It is also a wish to connect and deliver a message of affirmation.15

Many teens wish to give their parents a message of affirmation. Many others struggle with painful issues of feeling rejected, feeling different, and feeling isolated that perhaps can only be resolved by searching for information and/or eventually entering into a reunion experience.

How does an adoptive parent know what to do? Is information enough? How does one know it's the right time to initiate a reunion? What part should the adoptive parents play?

In over twenty years in the adoption field, Dr. Joyce Maguire Pavao sees adolescence as a very normal time to do a search, at least for information.

Most of the adolescent populations we’ve been working with over the last ten years were adopted into families who were given very little information about the birth parents. At that time, the adoptive parents probably didn't care about it, they just wanted their baby.

Now that the child has gotten older and asks questions, these same parents want help with those answers. As we work with parents and teens, we encourage them, if they have the inclination, to go and at least ask for non-identifying information. It is their right to have that information. The child is trying to form an identity, and he needs that information to help with that. Most likely at this point in time, there's a great deal of interest in just finding out information.16

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15 Burke, K. (1994) Personal interview
Addressing a Child’s Expectations, Fantasies, and Fears in Opening a Closed Adoption

Ages 6-9
1. What do you want to do at the visit with you birth mother or birth father?
2. What questions do you want to ask your birth mother or birth father?
3. Would you like to contact them by letter or phone prior to meeting them?
4. What do you think the first meeting will be like?
5. How do you feel about meeting them?
6. What do you want to do after the meeting?
7. What do you think your birth mother is going to say to you?
8. What do you want to say to them?
9. What do you want to wear?
10. What do you want to take with you – what type of present?
11. Do you want to take your report card?
12. How often do you think you would like to see them?

Ages 10-12
1. If you would like to have contact with your birth family, what would it be like?
2. What do you think will happen if you are able to have contact with your birth family?
3. If were to meet with you birth family, where would you want that to be?
4. What questions or information would you like to have before a visit or contact?
5. Who would you want to be with you, if anyone, at the visit?
6. Do you think things will change in your adoptive home?
7. What do you think would be the best thing that could happen? What would be the worst thing that could happen?
8. How often would you want to have contact?
9. What signals could we use if you change your mind or want to end the visit?
10. What would you like to tell your birth family about yourself, your family, school, etc.?
PRIVATE AGENCY STANDARDS

AS 7.03
Birth parents who are interested in the continuum of openness in adoption receive information and counseling.

_Interpretation:_ The continuum of openness can range from the provision of identifying information about the birth family at the time of placement, to organization-mediated ongoing written communication, to frequent, in-person contact with birth family members. Counseling helps birth parents consider whether continued contact is in the best interest of the child, with whom the child might continue contact, and the type and frequency of contact. The organization should explain limitations on confidentiality and document in the case record the birth parents’ preferences regarding the disclosure of personal information.

_Research Note:_ While some early research on open adoption presented conflicting conclusions, recent studies have demonstrated that most birth parents involved in open adoptions are satisfied with the arrangement.

AS 7.05
Prospective adoptive parents participate in an orientation that includes the following:

- an overview of the lifelong process of adoption and its meaning;
- the process for completing an adoption;
- the needs of children awaiting adoptive families;
- benefits and responsibilities of openness in adoption and the range of openness;
- the availability of adoption subsidies and post-adoption services; and
- criteria used to determine eligibility for adoptive parenthood.

_Interpretation:_ Prospective adoptive parents who have adopted a child through the program previously may only need a refresher orientation.

_Interpretation:_ When the program facilitates adoptions by older caregivers, the orientation is tailored to include information about the capacity to provide permanency over time for the child. This material can cover the need for additional support, circumstances that may adversely impact the ability to care for the child, and plans for the child if the caregiver is unable to provide care.
Research Note: While some early research on open adoption presented conflicting conclusions, studies have demonstrated that most adoptive parents involved in open adoptions are satisfied with the arrangement, and some desire even greater openness in the relationship with birth family members.

Literature suggests that prospective adoptive parents considering a special needs adoption may have concerns about the costs of providing services for the child, and these concerns can impact their decision to proceed with the adoption.

AS 7.07
When an open adoption is being planned, birth parents, prospective adoptive parents, and the child, as appropriate, receive assistance and support to:

a. develop positive relationships;
b. develop and agree on plans for continued contact; and
c. decide how to resolve conflicts that can arise, and agree on a method for renegotiating the plan when necessary.

PUBLIC AGENCY STANDARDS

PA-AS 7.03
Birth parents who are interested in the continuum of openness in adoption receive information and counseling.

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Research Note: While some early research on open adoption presented conflicting conclusions, studies have demonstrated that most adoptive parents involved in open adoptions are satisfied with the arrangement, and some desire even greater openness in the relationship with birth family members. Literature suggests that prospective adoptive parents considering a special needs adoption may have concerns about the costs of providing services for the child, and these concerns can impact their decision to proceed with the adoption.

**PA-AS 7.07**

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c. decide how to resolve conflicts that can arise, and agree on a method for renegotiating the plan when necessary.

**PA-PS 6.05**

Individuals have the opportunity to receive information and counseling regarding the implications of adoption or other transfer of custody that addresses:

a. types of available adoption and guardianship services, and the range of openness in adoption;
b. parents' legal rights and the rights termination process;
c. financial assistance that may be available;
d. separation from the child, and grief and loss;
e. long-term implications of the decision; and
f. making plans for the immediate future
ASSESSING MANAGEMENT OF ADOPTION COMMUNICATION
AND PSYCHOLOGICAL PRESENCE

Pre-Placement
1. How do you communicate with foster kids or family members who have left your home?
2. How would you introduce your adopted child to friends/family?
3. How do you talk about loss to others? Do you at all? How would this apply to your relationship with your future adopted child?
4. Have you had experience talking to birth parents? If so, how did you relate to them? Be specific/tangible.
5. Will you have a support system, someone who understands adoption issues?
6. What’s your idea of a bad adoption situation and an ideal adoption situation?
7. When you think about meeting your future child’s birth parent, what do you feel?
8. How would you feel if your adopted child wants to search for their birth parents?
9. How do you feel about having a relationship with birth parents?
10. How will you facilitate your child’s identity to his or her culture?
11. How will you answer questions about the birth parents?
12. What situations would you find difficult to follow through with the communication?
13. How would you feel if the child wanted to incorporate birth parents in your home?
14. How comfortable do you think you will be in discussing a child’s difficult
past with him?

**Post-Placement**

15. When is the last time you thought about your child’s birth parents?

16. Describe your feelings about those thoughts.

17. Tell me about your discussions about the child’s birth family.

18. When is the last time you had a conversation with your child about his birth parents?

19. How often does your child bring up his or her birth family?

20. How often do you think you think your child thinks about his birth family?

21. What are your plans to facilitate openness with the birth family?

22. Describe your emotions when your child discusses his or her birth family.

23. How have your child’s behaviors been affected as a result of the openness?

24. What are your concerns/challenges regarding openness?

25. How (what strategies do you use) to deal with cultural differences between the birth family and your family?

26. How do you handle your child bringing up his/her birth family?

27. Ask child: How do your adoptive parents respond to you asking about your birth parents?

28. Do you feel that you have enough information or answers to your child’s questions?

29. Observation of the home and interaction.

30. Speak with other children in the home to learn their views on adoption.
31. Have you had to deal with your child’s psychological presence?

32. How do the adoptive parents/child (vice versa) refer to the birth parents?

33. What’s the most challenging question your child has asked?

**Areas of additional exploration**

During the initial home study and pre-placement period, the worker should focus on the family’s willingness and ability to acknowledge and explore adoption issues, both personally and with others.

34. How open is the family to examine their motivation for adoption?

35. How comfortable is the family with the similarities and differences created by adoptive family life?

36. How willing and able is the family to discuss difficult and emotionally charged issues related to their child’s past? (Parents who are overly judgmental of the child’s birth family or who have difficulty in discussing sensitive topics are less likely to create a family environment that is emotionally connected to their child.)

37. How have the parents discussed other sensitive or difficult topics within the family?

38. How well does the adoptive family understand the child’s need to feel some level of connection to the birth family? (That connection may not be physical, but emotional through communication. Parents must always remember that for a child to develop a healthy sense of value, they need to feel valued – even from the birth parents who did not or could not care for them.)

39. How have the parents handled the discussion around dealing with difficult relatives?

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