OPENNESS IN ADOPTION

Note-Taking Guide

Day I

At the end of Day I, you will be able to:

• Explain the concept of openness and its importance in adoption practice.
• Describe the history of openness in adoption and identify current trends.
• Describe the impact of openness on birth, foster, adoptive and kinship families.
• Explain the impact of openness on children and youth.

Section I: Introduction

• Reflect upon what it means to be disconnected from one’s birth family.
• Discuss how children and youth in care may share similar experiences.

Who Do You Resemble?

- Personality
- Talents
- Physical features
- Habits
- Mannerisms
- Likes/dislikes
Section II: Key Concepts of Openness

- There are three major components on the continuum of openness:
  - Confidential/closed adoption
  - Semi-open or mediated adoption
  - Fully disclosed adoption

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Openness in Adoption

A continuum involving varying degrees and types of communication and contact that exists among members of the adoption triad before, during and following the placement of the adopted person

Open Adoption
One of the components on the continuum
Section III: The Importance of Openness

- Openness in adoption supports the goals of child welfare for children and youth.
- It emphasizes the value of positive relationships and essential connections for children, youth, and families.
- Openness empowers decision-making and self-determination by the parties involved.
Section IV: History and Trends

- The concept of openness in adoption has changed several times throughout the history of adoption practice.
- Additional information about the history of openness in adoption in Ohio can be found in the Betsy Norris Story on the Adoption Network Cleveland website (http://www.adoptionnetwork.org).
- Major trends that impact openness in adoption are (1) demographics of children in adoption, (2) current practices in adoption, (3) changes in how society communicates.
Section V: Overview of the Impact of Openness in Adoption on the Triad Members

- There are benefits and challenges related to openness for each member of the adoption triad.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Triad Members</th>
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<tr>
<td>Benefits</td>
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<td>Challenges</td>
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Section VI: Impact of Openness on Adoption Issues for Triad Members

- There are seven core adoption issues that impact birth and adoptive families such as (1) grief and loss, (2) control, (3) rejection and fear of abandonment, (4) shame and guilt, (5) trust, (6) identity, and (7) intimacy.
- Various factors should be considered in determining the level of openness for birth and adoptive families.

The Seven Core Issues

- Grief and Loss
- Control
- Identity
- Rejection and Fear of Abandonment
- Trust
- Shame and Guilt

Openness in Adoption
Developed by IHS for the Ohio Child Welfare Training Program, June 2016
Section VII: Impact of Openness on Children and Youth: Development and Perspective

- Openness impacts child and youth development.
- The child’s and youth’s role and perspective are important to consider in openness in adoption.

One of the changes I would like to see is the movement away from "the best interest of the child" and towards "the best interest of the adult the child will become."

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List three ways you will use the information from this training.

1. 

2. 

3. 

______________________________
Day II

At the end of Day II, you will be able to:

- Explain your role in facilitating openness in adoption.
- Determine what tools and strategies of intervention to use with the adoption triad members involved in openness in adoption.

Section VIII: Ethical Issues in Openness

- Assessors play an important role in facilitating ethical practice in openness and must adhere to ethical standards of practice.
- Openness in adoption practice is guided by four key principles, including (1) responsibility to clients and self-determination, (2) integrity, (3) care and protection of the most vulnerable, and (4) communication, honesty and truthfulness.
- Eight values provide the foundation for ethical practice.
Section IX: Preplacement Strategies and Tools

- The role of the assessor during the pre-placement phase of openness is to prepare and engage birth and adoptive families.
- A number of factors must be considered and important questions asked in preparing triad members for open relationships.
Section X: Post-Legalization Strategies and Tools

- During the post-legalization phase adjustments are sometimes necessarily in openness contacts.
- There are effective strategies and tools available to an assessor to mitigate conflicts in post-legalization open adoption agreements.
- The internet and social media has changed the face of openness in adoption practice. Assessors should be skilled in assisting families with issues related to social media.

As time moves on, relationships, circumstances and expectations about openness may change...
Section XI: Opening a Closed Adoption

- The motives which lead members of the adoption triad to open a closed adoption are diverse.
- It is important to respond appropriately to the request of the adopted person who desires to establish contact with their birth families.
- Assessors must evaluate the child’s or youth’s readiness and must know strategies to help facilitate opening a closed adoption.

Why might a family choose to open a closed adoption?

When an adoptive family seeks to open the closed adoption of minor children/youth, what will likely change within the family?
Section XII: Agency Policies and Practices

- Agencies have a role and responsibility in openness in adoption practice.
- Agency’s policies and procedures regarding openness must be guided by state rules and statues and standards of best practice.

The Agency’s Role in Openness

- The agency provides a safe, neutral space for each triad member
- Triad members rely on licensed agencies for quality services
Section XIII: Transfer of Learning

- Assessors should consider obtaining additional information and developing skills in facilitating openness in adoption.

List three ways you will use the information from this training.

1. 

2. 

3. 
OPENNESS IN ADOPTION

Definitions and Key Concepts of Openness in Adoption

Openness in adoption: A concept used in child welfare practice that refers to a continuum involving varying degrees and types of communication and contact that exists among members of the adoption triad before, during and following the placement of the adopted person (Harold Grotevant, Ruth McRoy, 1998)

Adoption triad: Refers to the birth parent(s); the adoptive parent(s), and the adopted person.

Adoption constellation: Refers to all individuals impacted by adoption including the triad members as well as the birth and adoptive grandparents and siblings, future spouses of the adoptee and birth parents, foster and caregivers, and close friends of triad members.

Psychological presence: Dr. Deborah Fravel defines psychological presence as “the symbolic existence of an individual in the perception of other family members in a way that influences thoughts, emotions, behavior, identity or unity of remaining family members.”

Emotional permanence: Refers to a strong sense of emotional security and belonging based on trusting, nurturing and enduring relationships that develop between adoptees and their permanent caregivers [or other significant individuals].

Structural openness: Refers to the level of contact between birth and adoptive families (Siegel & Smith, 2012).

Communicative openness: “A free expression and discussion which takes place within adoptive families; the ability to talk freely and to feel heard and understood” (Siegel & Smith, 2012).

Collaborative relationships are relationships that help strengthen and maintain children’s attachments. In open adoptions or adoptions by foster or kinship caregivers, members of the child’s birth family may continue to have contact with the child and family after the adoption has been finalized. Or, when
children in care are reunified with their birth families, they can often maintain attachments to their foster or kinship caregivers, preventing separation trauma. Prior caregivers can also provide respite care when needed, thus continuing in a supportive role to the birth family.

**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 records, but is not intended for transmission to either party (McRoy, et. al., 1998).

**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. 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).

**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 (Severson, 1997).

**Open records** – Refers to access to information about the adopted person’s birth history and birth certificate.
## OPENNESS IN ADOPTION

### Essential Connections

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<tr>
<th>Information</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Significant Person</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Group</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Means of Support</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Source of Joy</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Systems of Values</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>History</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Special Place</strong></td>
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</tbody>
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OPENNESS IN ADOPTION

Seven Core Issues of Adoption

1. Grief and Loss

   **Birth Families**
   - Birthparents may experience ambiguous loss: the loss of someone who still is alive vs. deceased (Powell & Afifi, 2005).
   - Birthparents lose, perhaps forever, the child to whom they are genetically connected. Subsequently, they undergo multiple losses associated with the loss of role, the loss of contact, and perhaps the loss of the other birth parent that reshape the entire course of their lives (Silverstein & Kaplan, 1982).
   - Birthparents may undergo an initial, brief, intense period of grief at the time of the loss of the child, but are encouraged by well-meaning friends and family to move on in their lives and to believe that their child is better off. The grief, however, does not vanish, and, in fact, it has been reported that birth mothers may deny the experience for up to ten years (Concerned United Birthparents & Campbell, 1979).

   **Adoptive Families**
   - Loss of their “dream” child is major for adoptive families. No matter how well resolved the loss of bearing a child appears to be, it continues to affect the adoptive family at a variety of points throughout the families love cycle (Berman & Bufferd 1986).

   **Adopted Person**
   - Children will grieve, at some level, the loss of their primary parents. Even children separated from their parents in infancy will grieve the dream parent and “what might have been.” Common reactions to this loss include denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance (Silverstein & Kaplan, 1982).
   - Lois Melina and Sharon Kaplan Roszia (1993), in their book, The Open Adoption Experience, report the costs of confidentiality, and the many extreme losses experienced by the adoptee, birth and adoptive parents. They identify the specific losses in closed adoption as follows: the loss of knowledge of ancestors, access to important information or ability to have this information updated, knowing the people who gave them life and cared for them, and the loss of the chance to resolve these issues due to denial.
2. Control

**Birth Families**

- Birthparents who feel out of control may become overprotective of their subsequent children (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2013d).

**Adoptive Families**

- For adoptive parents, the intricacies of the adoption process lead to feelings of helplessness. These feelings sometimes cause adoptive parents to view themselves as powerless, and perhaps entitled to be parents, leading to laxity in parenting. As an alternative response, some adoptive parents may seek to regain the lost control by becoming overprotective and controlling, leading to rigidity in the parent/adoptive relationship (Silverstein & Kaplan, 1982).

**Adopted Person**

- Most often, the children have had no control or decision-making power over the separation from their primary parents. This generates feelings of frustration and helplessness. Consequently, they may try to regain control of their lives in other areas (Silverstein & Kaplan, 1982).

3. Rejection and Fear of Abandonment

**Birth Families**

- Birthparents frequently condemn themselves for being irresponsible, as does society (Silverstein & Kaplan, 1982).
- Birthparents must surrender not only the child but also their volition, leading to feelings of victimization and powerlessness (Silverstein & Kaplan, 1982).

**Adoptive Families**

- Adoptive families may fear eventual abandonment by the child who may already know the whereabouts of his or her birth parents/relatives.
- Adoptive parents may sense that their bodies have rejected them if they are infertile. This impression may lead the infertile couple, for example, to feel betrayed or rejected by God (Silverstein & Kaplan, 1982).
- When they come to adoption, the adoptors, possibly unconsciously, anticipate the birthparents' rejection and criticism of their parenting (Silverstein & Kaplan, 1982).
- Adoptive parents struggle with issues of entitlement, wondering if perhaps they were never meant to be parents, especially to this child. The adopting family, then, may watch for the adoptee to reject them, interpreting many benign, childish actions as rejection. To avoid that ultimate rejection, some
adoptive parents expel or bind adolescent adoptees prior to the accomplishment of appropriate emancipation tasks (Silverstein & Kaplan, 1982).

**Adopted Person**

- Regardless of the actual circumstances surrounding separation, children often feel rejected and abandoned by the primary parents. They may feel that they are unlovable and “unkeepable,” and they may act out to test the commitment of the caregiving or adoptive family (Institute for Human Services, 2015).

4. **Shame and Guilt**

**Birth Families**

- Guilt and shame are common feelings experienced by birth parents caused by such things as:
  - Losing permanent custody of their children
  - Voluntarily relinquish parental rights
  - Cultural violations (i.e. “promiscuous” or antisocial behavior, thereby devaluing their sense of self-worth/self-esteem)
  - Unresolved guilt about how the child may be feeling about his or her separation from birth family members and his or her adoption
  - Disappointment to extreme rage if the adoptive party defaults on their commitment to the openness arrangement

**Adoptive Families**

- May feel shame related to issues of infertility, or having to be involved in an adoption process
- May feel guilty that their desire to adopt the child prevailed over the birthparents unsuccessful efforts towards reunification

**Adopted Person**

- Shame: Child feels badly about who he is
- Guilt: Child feels badly about his or her adoption predicament (feelings of torn loyalties between his birth and adoptive families).
5. Trust

**Birth Families**

- Some birthparents may doubt if they can trust the adoptive family to honor their post-legalization contact agreement.
- Distrust of the agency/system, especially in a custody battle resulting in a TPR may spill over into a birthparent’s distrust of the adoptive family.

**Adoptive Families**

- Individuals who become parents by birth know their background histories and circumstances; adoptive families involved in unfamiliar party adoption must rely upon the accuracy and truthfulness of information provided by the agency and birth family.
- Some adoptive families may wonder if the birth parents will honor privacy agreements or in other situations, fade away completely.

**Adopted Person**

- Separation from the primary parents, especially at an early age, may threaten the ability to form basic trust and attachment. They may have difficulty forming and maintaining relationships.

6. Identity

**Birth Families**

- Some birthparents experience role confusion or may have difficulty understanding they are not the parents of the child.
- In adoption, birthparents are parents and [later on], are not (Silverstein & Kaplan, 1982).

**Adoptive Families**

- Adoptive parents and birthparents share a common experience of role confusion. They are handicapped by the lack of positive identity associated with being either a birthparent or adoptive parent (Kirk, 1964). Neither set of parents can lay full claim to the adoptee and neither can gain distance from any problems that may arise (Silverstein & Kaplan, 1982).
- In adoption, adoptive parents who were not parents suddenly become parents (Silverstein & Kaplan, 1982).
Adopted Person

- The lack of information and secrecy that frequently surround the child’s history and primary parents make it difficult for children to establish an identity. They may feel different or like they do not fit in.

- Another study has shown that adoptive families that maintained contact with birth families also talked more about adoption-related topics which was associated with the development of adoptive identity (Von Korff & Grotevant, 2011).

7. Intimacy

Birth Families

- “Birthparents may come to equate sex, intimacy, and pregnancy with pain leading them to avoid additional loss by shunning intimate relationships. Further, birthparents may question their ability to parent a child successfully. In many instances, the birthparents fear intimacy in relationships with opposite sex partners, family or subsequent children” (Silverstein & Kaplan, 1982).

Adoptive Families

- “The adoptive parents' couple relationship may have been irreparably harmed by the intrusive nature of medical procedures and the scapegoating and blame that may have been part of the diagnosis of infertility. These residual effects may become the hallmark of the later relationship” (Silverstein & Kaplan, 1982).

- Foster-to-adopt families may struggle with feeling fully emotionally connected to a child who continues to maintain ties with his or her birth family following legalization.
OPENNESS IN ADOPTION

Child Development and Adoption

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Task</th>
<th>Relation to Adoption</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Infancy</td>
<td>Learning to attach</td>
<td>Babies begin the attachment process in the womb, so even separation at birth can impact their ability to attach.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Toddlerhood</td>
<td>Learning to self-regulate (manage their emotions and behavior)</td>
<td>Children learn to regulate through their caregiver. If the caregiver isn’t regulated (is nervous, lacks confidence, or is angry or upset all the time) the child cannot learn to regulate their emotions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preschool</td>
<td>Learning to take initiative; “magical thinking” stage of cognitive development</td>
<td>They will ask a lot of questions, even if they don’t understand the concepts. They have an inflated sense of the control they have over their world. If adoptive parents are uncomfortable talking about adoption, they could decide adoption is shameful, and therefore they are shameful.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Agers</td>
<td>Developing competence; understands the concept of adoption and loss; want to fit in with peers</td>
<td>They are less likely to ask questions, even though they may be curious. They are identifying their strengths, likes, and dislikes and curious about traits that run in the family.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adolescence</td>
<td>Forming their identity; peers more influential than parents</td>
<td>Children this age may resist authority and try on new identities. May be thinking about the future and separation from family.</td>
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</table>

Read the following case study, and then answer the questions for your assigned developmental stage:

- What adoption issues might be triggered for Jadonna?
- What behaviors and feelings is Jadonna expressing as she deals with these issues?
- How can openness (structural and/or communicative) help Jadonna with these issues?

**Background:**

Jadonna is a 14 year old African-American female who was adopted by the Parker family. When Jadonna was only a few months old her birthmother, Delanna left her with a neighbor for several days. After multiple unsuccessful attempts to contact Delanna the neighbor called Children Services. Delanna was unable to be located and Children Services determined Jeanette’s father, Carl, was serving a lengthy prison term for drug distribution. Delanna was a recent immigrant to America and had no family here. Carl’s parents and siblings were contacted, but they were either unwilling to take Jadonna or found to be unsuitable placements.

Jadonna was placed in foster care. A few months later, Delanna was located when she contacted her neighbor about Jadonna. Delanna had overdosed on drugs and then entered a rehabilitation facility, where she was currently residing. Delanna was distraught that Jadonna was in foster care, and
contacted all of Carl’s relatives until she was able to find a cousin of Carl’s living in a neighboring state who was willing to help. Children Services completed a Homestudy and approved the relative, Cindy Parker and her husband Michael, for placement.

After Delanna was informed that Jadonna would be living with the Parkers, she decided to return to her home country. She felt she was not ready to parent, and without Carl’s support, she needed to be near her family.

**Scenario one – age 14 months:**

Jadonna was placed with the Parkers just after her first birthday. She has been fussy and difficult to get to sleep. She is a very picky eater and the Parkers are worried she isn’t getting the nutrition she needs. She seems uninterested in her new toys and stuffed animals. Cindy is very upset that Jadonna isn’t settling into their home and worries if she did the right thing. She is often tearful.

**Scenario two – age 4 years:**

The Parkers have stayed in touch with Delanna through letters and Skype calls. They recently received a letter stating Delanna will be coming to the states for a visit next month. She has asked to see Jadonna. Jadonna has been asking a lot of questions about her birth parents, and Cindy caught her staring at the pictures of Carl and Delanna she has in her room and looking sad. Recently, Cindy punished Jadonna for writing on the wall with a marker, and Jadonna cried uncontrollably for several minutes. When she finally calmed down, she said she was bad and that’s why her parents didn’t keep her. When Cindy asked Jadonna if she would like to visit with her birthmother, Jadonna looked slightly worried and asked if Cindy would be going too.

**Scenario three – age 10 years:**

Delanna has returned to the states twice and visited with Jadonna. They also email regularly. Jadonna seems to really like when Delanna sends her pictures of family events. When Delanna arrived in the states for her next visit, she got permission to pick Jadonna up from school and take her for ice cream. When she saw Jadonna walking with her friends in front of the school, she waved warmly and went to give her a hug. Jadonna squirmed out of her arms and ran quickly to the car. As they drove off, Jadonna yelled at her for embarrassing her and was angry that now all her friends would be asking who Delanna is.

**Scenario four - age 14 years:**

Recently, Jadonna received an email from Delanna stating that Carl would be getting out of prison next year. At that time, Delanna would return to the states to live. She shared a little about their plans and how excited she was that she would be living closer to Jadonna. Jadonna didn’t tell her parents about this news. The Parkers noticed that Jadonna seemed sullen and spent more time in her room on her phone. They also noticed that Jadonna was dressing a lot like Delanna and wearing her hair in the same way. One night Cindy knocked on Jadonna’s door and asked her to come play a family game. Jadonna screamed that they weren’t her real family and slammed the door.