

Open Adoption: An Alternate Path

When most pregnant and parenting teens think about adoption, a very negative image comes to mind. Many teens have friends who have traveled unwillingly down the adoption path within the state child welfare system. Their parental rights were terminated involuntarily, they did not choose the adoptive parents, and they likely had limited future contact with their child. But adoptions do not need to follow this adversarial route; there is a positive alternative.

At Open Adoption & Family Services (OA&FS), we have been working with DHS caseworkers to make a proactive open adoption alternate path available to teens. For most pregnant teens, parenting is their first choice. However, if parenting proves to be more difficult than they anticipated, they may need a back up plan. It is especially important for teens to have access to this option, since teens are twice as likely to have their child removed by the state as women who give birth in their 20's. If adoption is likely to be in their future, we believe they should have some choices about what that adoption will look like. Open adoption can provide them with a viable adoption path.

Open Adoption & Family Services is a non-profit agency licensed in OR and WA. In the past 23 years, we have placed over 1,000 children in open adoption families. We are a very unique agency in that we are pro-choice, not religiously-affiliated and welcome the LGBT community. All services are free of charge for pregnant and parenting women and their partners. OA&FS provides extensive, non-biased options counseling. In fact 80% of the women we provide counseling to, do not choose adoption. We simply connect them with the resources they need. In addition, we are committed to including the father whenever possible, and offer services to birth grandparents as well. OA&FS also has materials available in Spanish and Spanish-speaking counselors available on staff.

If a teen decides to pursue an adoption, she will be empowered to create a plan that reflects her adoption vision. She will review thorough, 20 page information packets on each of the families she's interested in. We have 45-65 families available that have been very carefully screened by the agency. She then selects a family she feels a connection with and would like to meet. As they build their relationship, we provide our expertise, guidance and support. Together the teen and the family create a legally binding contract for ongoing visits. The goal is for them to develop a comfortable, natural friendship. Together, they discuss the birth plan at the hospital, naming the baby and creating an entrustment ceremony. After the placement, the visits begin. Through the visits, the teen can watch her child grow and be a part of his life. This gives her the peace of mind that she needs to feel resolved about her decision.



Melissa was 16 when she found out she was pregnant. Here's what she had to say about her experience:

What do you think teens think about adoption?

Teens have no idea what adoption is like. Some kids at school say "I can't believe you gave your baby away." I tell them adoption has changed, it's a good thing. I chose my baby's parents and I see him all the time. I've seen him every month or so since he was born. I call the adoptive

continued on the next page...

parents whenever I need to and see how he's doing.

How did you come to your adoption decision?

I wanted to keep my baby at first, then my mom told me about open adoption and we found Open Adoption & Family Services. They did the kind of open adoptions I wanted. I felt really comfortable with my counselor. I found the perfect family; I knew it right away, even before I met them.

Why did you like them?

They had the same holiday traditions as my family. The adoptive dad, Dave, is a really involved dad and the adoptive mom, Patrice, is into scrap booking and takes pictures all the time. I knew I'd always see him growing, even if I wasn't right there watching him.

What was it like when you met them?

I was nervous at first, but they were really warm and helped me feel comfortable right away. After we met, we went out to dinner and learned more about each other on a personal level.

How did your relationship develop?

I was 5 months along when I met them, so we had a lot of time to get to know each other. I emailed Patrice every day and she has become like a big sister to me. We have such a close bond. We all went out to dinner about every 2 weeks, we went Christmas shopping together and Patrice went to labor classes with me. She and my mom were my labor coaches. We created an open adoption agreement for 6 visits a year, but we have such a natural friendship that I see Nathan all the time.

What are the visits like?

I can see what great parents they are, and see how much they love Nathan. During the visits we usually take a walk, go out to dinner, or just hang around their house and play with him. I bring my friends sometimes too, so they're a part of his life too. They always keep me informed about how he's doing and how he changes

What is your life like now?

I'm 17 now and in high school. I went to an alternative high school during my pregnancy and took classes on-line from home. I'm all caught up now.



continued on the next page...

How do you feel about your adoption decision now?

I know it was the right decision. I wanted him to have the best life and I didn't feel ready to raise a baby. It was a hard decision. I had a month where I didn't see him because I was grieving on my own. I talked to Patrice though, and she was there for me.

Have you gotten ongoing support from the agency?

They've been great. I can still have counseling with my adoption counselor whenever I want. She introduced me to other birthmoms and that's been really helpful. My mom has also been supportive. She fell in love with the adoptive parents too. They've become like a second family.

What would you say to a teen considering adoption?

I'd tell her my story. I'd say that adoption has changed. Now you can choose your child's parents, see your child as he grows and be a part of his life.

Many professionals who work with pregnant and parenting teens believe that teens don't plan adoptions. But of the 13,000-14,000 females who voluntarily plan adoptions across the country each year, 25% of them are teens. When teens are empowered with choices, access to information and the tools to have a life-long relationship with their child and the adoptive parents, adoption becomes a viable option.

If you or your staff would like a presentation or materials from Open Adoption & Family Services, please call us at 1.800.772.1115 or email us at info@openadopt.org.

Feel free to check out our website at www.openadopt.org. You can also request a free DVD about a teen who chose adoption.