

Open Page

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Open Adoption & Family Services, Inc.

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Note From the Director

When we opened our doors 22 years ago, we hoped to forge a new path in the world of adoption. Without a model to guide us, we created the first open adoption agency in the northwest. We didn't know what the future would hold, but we were certain of our mission. We held a heartfelt belief that the ongoing needs of adopted children would be better addressed if their birthparents and adoptive parents honored and respected each other through a lifelong connection. We have stayed true to that mission ever since.

Two decades and over 1,000 placements later, we are no longer pioneers. Now we have the wisdom of experience. We've learned that open adoption relationships are like any other relationships; they grow and change and ebb and flow. An open adoption relationship is valuable, just like any friendship that is worth nurturing and cultivating. We have also learned that open adoption relationships come in many forms; they are as unique as the individuals themselves. Lastly, we have learned from the kids that they deeply appreciate the efforts their birth and adoptive families make to keep in touch and hold each other in high regard.

But what happens if, despite our best efforts, the connection fades? How do we stay true to the spirit of open adoption when, due to lack of contact, there is no open adoption? How then do we meet the child's needs? We have found that adoptive parents can, in fact, create a culture of openness in their family that is not linked to the amount of contact they have with the birth family. Holding the birth family in high regard by displaying photos of them around the house, speaking frequently and positively about them, and discussing adoption openly and honestly, creates an environment of openness for the child. These actions send a message to the child that their birth family members are a part of their family, that they hold intrinsic value.



A family can be an "open adoption family" by cultivating a culture of openness. This Open Page issue is dedicated to how to make a culture of openness a reality.

Shaw Lewis



Openness Without Contact?

By: Kelly Sullivan, OA&FS Counselor/Mediator

Many adoptive parents embrace the philosophy of open adoption; they envision their child encountering life's questions with the supportive presence of adoptive and birthparents. Sadly, this vision does not always reflect the reality of open adoption experiences. A birthparent may have lost touch, or perhaps a birthparent was not ready for openness from the beginning, as is the case with many birthfathers. Whatever the reason, adoptive parents in these situations are challenged to build openness without direct communication with a birthparent. It can be more difficult to make room for birthparents when they have not remained connected with the adoptive family. However, we know from a history of closed adoption that honoring the adoptee's connection to their birth

family is not only a healthy way to address this absence, it can be healing. Keeping this in mind, many adoptive parents use compassion and creativity to take a new look at openness.

For Julie, there were visits with her son's birthmother in the beginning, but over time that contact dwindled. Julie feels times of sadness both about the lack of contact and the wonderful things that her son's birthmother is missing. Because Julie was able to know her child's birthparent, she is able to envision clearly the difficulties that his birthmother is facing. Julie knows that if her son's birthmother could be involved, she would be. Julie keeps this in mind as she prepares for her son's questions, and

OPENNESS WITHOUT CONTACT continues on page 2

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OPENNESS WITHOUT CONTACT *continued from page 1*

she states that her son's birthmother is still a natural part of their lives. Her son keeps a photograph of his birthmother in his room, and includes his birthmother in their prayers. Julie will also mention his birthmother in their casual conversations. Julie holds onto the hope that there will be more visits in the future. In the meantime, she gives him ways to understand his birthmother's love for him. Julie tells him, "Some people who love you, see you a lot. Some people who love you, think of you a lot."

Some parents choose to carefully document the time they had with their child's birthparent. Sheryl knew there was a possibility that she would not have ongoing contact with her child's birthmother and so it became even more important to document details about the adoption. Sheryl kept a journal and wrote about her first meeting with her daughter's birthmother. Sheryl's daughter is about 13 months old now, and, as Sheryl suspected, contact with her child's birthmother has been sporadic. This has been a source of frustration for Sheryl, but she tries not to get caught up in that feeling. Sheryl says that she makes the effort to reach out to her daughter's birthmother and keeps the door open. At the end of the day, she focuses her energy on taking joy in parenting.

Karen and Tom were chosen by birthparents who wanted a closed adoption. They would have preferred contact with their daughter's birthparents, but Karen and Tom decided to honor their daughter's birthparents by fully respecting their decision to have a closed adoption. Even without the knowledge of whom their child looks like or acts like, Karen says that her daughter's birthparents have become a natural and constant part of her daily thoughts. At their daughter's christening, Karen and Tom chose to say a few words about their daughter's birthparents. Though Karen commented that some of her family and friends did not understand, she thought it would have felt unnatural not to acknowledge them in some way. Karen and Tom imagine they will continue to honor their daughter's birthparents in that way, until their daughter is old enough to make her own choices about acknowledging them.



Adoptive families have learned many ways to help their children find connections to their birthparents. One adoptive parent sought out riding lessons for her daughters, knowing that their love for horses is a trait they share with their birth family. Some adoptive families have been able to spend time with their child's birth sibling, and they cherish those connections. Adoptions with limited contact create a different type of challenge for adoptive parents. They learn to think broadly of the word openness, and through their flexibility and thoughtfulness, they create a new vision of connection for their child.

Kelly Sullivan has been a counselor/mediator since August of 2005. Because of her background working with children and families, she is especially drawn to learning about adoptive families' ongoing experiences in their open adoptions.



Give a Gift to Birthmothers

A basket of soaps, a relaxing CD, a gift certificate... Please donate raffle prizes for our annual Lifegivers Retreat, designed to pamper and nurture birthmothers. See the Agency Happenings section for details.

Out of Touch:

Why Some Birthparents are Unable to Stay in Contact

By: **Katie R. Stallman, OA&FS Counselor/Mediator**

“We don’t have much contact with the birthmom,” they told me with a sigh. “We love the concept of open adoption but our adoption isn’t really open,” they confessed as if they had done something wrong. “We really wanted openness but they just disappeared,” another family lamented. I have heard adoptive families express a variety of sentiments in regard to loss or lack of contact with their child’s birthparents. Some adoptive parents expected the relationship to be that way based on their initial meeting with the birthmom or birthdad. Some were truly surprised and disappointed by the turn of events and expressed feelings of guilt, shame, and sadness. Though all of the families expressed sadness regarding the loss, they remained hopeful and creative about possible contact in the future.

Although it may seem strange in our current open adoption “climate” (a climate that clearly affirms and supports the role of birthparents in their children’s lives) that some birthparents are unable to have contact, it does happen. The reasons described below are often intertwined with one another, further complicating things. Though it is impossible to truly know why one person stays out of touch unless they tell you explicitly, these are the most common things we have seen at OA&FS over the years.

Grief

The grief experience is different for every birthparent. Some wish to share it with the adoptive family, finding contact quite comforting. Others find it absolutely unbearable and don’t want to subject anyone else to their pain, especially the child and the adoptive parents. Some of the birthmoms I have worked with who have opted for less or no contact indicated the following sentiment at the time of placement: “It is just too painful to see the child,” or “I just can’t handle it.”

Lack of support

Though a birthparent may intentionally choose openness for themselves, they may have family members that disagree with that choice. New partners may feel resentful of the time spent with adoptive families. Other family members, perhaps more familiar and comfortable with the closed adoption concept, may encourage birthparents “to forget.” When birthparents already feel vulnerable due to their grief, they may welcome the “advice” and stop communicating.

Too many other responsibilities

It is often a birthparent’s commitment to other responsibilities that leads them to make an adoption decision in the first place. Perhaps they have additional

children that require all of their attention. Perhaps they are struggling to balance the responsibilities of family, work, running a household, and pursuing an education. For some birthparents, when they add keeping in touch with a whole new family, it simply feels like too much for them.

Uncertainty regarding new role

Many birthparents come to OA&FS with very little understanding of open adoption. In the past three years an average of 24% of our birthparents contacted us from the hospital. Though a last minute placement does not necessarily mean birthparents won’t have contact, it generally means they are adjusting to the whole adoption concept in a short period of time. And even though birthparents might be really excited about the concept of openness, many feel a deep and daunting fear that the adoptive parents don’t really want them around. So, they languish, afraid to do anything, saying things like: “I just don’t know where I fit,” “It feels weird,” or “I know I am not the mom but I still feel like the mom.”

Lack of involvement in the initial adoption planning process

Birthfathers are by far the most underrepresented people in this process. Often times they don’t know about the pregnancy or are even unknown to the birthmother. If the birthfather is aware of the pregnancy, but not involved in a relationship with the birthmother, he may feel unwelcome and particularly insecure about his potential role in the adoption planning process. Sometimes staying away feels like a less complicated choice for the birthfather (and for everybody else involved). Though we do our best to involve birthfathers, legal fears and the different adoption laws in Oregon and Washington often complicate this issue further.

Unstable lifestyle

Some birthparents planning adoptions are struggling with mental health issues, drug addiction, or issues related to poverty. Over the years, I have seen some birthparents purposefully choose not to have contact out of concern for what their child and the adoptive family will think of them. When they are in touch, they want to be at their best and not burden other people with their problems.

Pursuit of future plans/goals

Many birthparents plan adoptions because of a future goal which parenting at that time would prevent. These plans may be related to travel, education, or partnering with someone new. Many birthparents are able to manage an open adoption

OUT OF TOUCH *continued from page 3*

relationship while achieving these goals, which is often a huge source of pride. However, I have heard some birthparents say that pursuing those goals while managing the relationship is too difficult.

Disappointment/anger with relationship

In rare cases, but in some, there is a “falling out” between a birthparent/or other birth family member and the adoptive family. This can happen for a variety of reasons. Some adoptive parents are more threatened than they anticipated by the openness once they are “in” the relationship. Birthparents sensing this, in turn feel threatened, further escalating the fear and feeding the adoptive family’s insecurities. This can become a vicious cycle. Sometimes it has nothing to do with the adoptive family, but with a birthparent or birth family member that may have had unrealistic expectations that

could not be met. “If I can’t have contact the way I want it, I won’t have it all.” This is never a positive path. If this is something you have experienced, we urge you to contact OA&FS for help. On a positive note, I have seen some damaged relationships move toward a better place with counseling, time, understanding, and a continued focus on the best interests of the child.

While the above list is by no means exhaustive, or meant to “categorize” or “simplify” the often painful and complex experience of birthparents, it is a start—a start that sparks even greater compassion among adoptive families, a start that lends itself to greater insights to share with the children involved, and a start that helps birthparents and their family members normalize their experiences and start to heal.

Katie R. Stallman has enjoyed six inspirational years with OA&FS learning about the depths of the human spirit.



Honoring Sibling Connections

By: **Katie R. Stallman, OA&FS Counselor/Mediator**

“I didn’t know what to expect with a teenager,” Beth exclaimed. When she and husband Dan, along with big brother Sammy, adopted Lela, they were told that Lela had a big sister. Enter Ashleigh. Ashleigh was 13 years old when she learned her mother was pregnant and planning an adoption. Initially, she didn’t know what to expect either. At first she felt overwhelmed, but then accepted that adoption was the best plan for her sibling. “I just knew I wanted a relationship,” she said. They all met soon after Lela’s birth and slowly built a relationship. “I just loved Sammy. I thought Beth and Dan were really cool. And Lela was a blob, but really cute,” Ashleigh laughed. Though very excited about the prospect of including Ashleigh in their family, Beth had some trepidation too. “I just didn’t know what to make of it,” Beth said.

Everybody Benefits

Fast forward two years. Ashleigh regularly baby-sits for Sammy and Lela and is now a big part of the clan. Sammy has claimed Ashleigh as his big sister. Ashleigh is eternally grateful for adoptive dad Dan’s computer expertise. Beth speaks proudly of Ashleigh’s school achievements, her sense of humor, and the assistance she consistently provides with the kids. Little Lela is a spitfire who adores both her brother and sister. Beth and Ashleigh acknowledge the relationship has developed in ways they did not anticipate. “I didn’t expect to feel so close and attached to all of them,” Ashleigh said. “Ashleigh’s presence completes our family,” Beth said.

A Subtle Supporter

Ashleigh’s mother, Julie (Lela’s birthmother), has

remained a guiding force in the open adoption relationship. According to Beth and Ashleigh, though Julie isn’t as involved as she would



always like, she has been a nurturing presence for all of them, giving her blessing for this connection to grow and strengthen over time. “Julie has been instrumental in setting up this relationship and facilitating it. There are different ways of giving to a relationship. Julie is very actively giving,” Beth added.

Lasting Connections

Beth and Ashleigh are hopeful that their ongoing interaction will lead the way for Lela to create her own relationship with her big sister. “Lela will hopefully be able to come to me about anything as she gets older,” Ashleigh said. Several key beliefs held by the participants in this relationship have allowed it to thrive. The presence of birth relatives should be validated since they can and do play a unique role in the life of the child. Though a willingness to contribute time and energy to a relationship is needed, the benefits far outweigh the challenges involved. A child can never have too many people who love him or her. Regarding Ashleigh’s ever-evolving relationship with her family, Beth commented, “You just have to navigate it, celebrate it, and figure out different ways of making it work.” And that is just what they have done.

Katie R. Stallman, LICSW, sends a big thank you to Ashleigh and Beth for sharing their insights and wisdom.



TOOL KIT: For Creating a Culture of Openness

By: Gillian Freney, OA&FS Counselor/Mediator

Everyone can build and maintain a culture of openness in their family. Openness does not hinge on a particular quantity or quality of contact between adoptive and birth families. A culture of openness embraces the truth about your child's adoption, and gives him or her tools for integrating their many and complex feelings about adoption. Here are some tools for building and maintaining a culture of openness in your family:

- Talk to your child. Don't wait for them to ask questions about their adoption or their birth family. Speaking first creates an atmosphere of safety and comfort.
 - Reach out to birthparents regularly, even if they don't respond. Invite them, without pressure or guilt, to know you all better. That tenth gentle invitation may be the thing that makes a birthparent connect, even after many years. If you can't reach out to your child's birthparents for some reason, devise some sort of ceremonial reaching out (see rituals). Reaching out to your child's birthparents tells your child you cherish every aspect of his or her being.
 - Be a thorough historian of your child's birth family, birth, and adoption. Make a life story book and write down all the details. Take pictures. Your child will treasure these details of his or her story regardless of the level of future contact you have.
 - Be honest with your child. Children need and deserve as much truth about their birth family as is appropriate for their age. Keep the lines of communication open with everyone involved. Talk about your child's birthparents with him or her (even if it's painful). Seek guidance if you're struggling with how much information is too much for your child's developmental level.
- Don't forget about your child's birthfather, even if you don't know much about him. He represents half of your child's biological heritage, and your child's curiosity and emotional needs will extend to him, too. Help your child have a compassionate and respectful view of his or her birthfather. It could impact your child's self-regard. Remember that every effort you make to build bridges with birthparents, you do for your child.
 - Join a play group. Having the opportunity to play and build relationships with other adopted children normalizes the adoption experience. Adoptive children form friendships, share experiences, and ask questions of their peers.
 - Connect with extended family. Don't forget about birth grandparents, aunts, uncles or cousins. Talk about your child's lineage even if you don't know all of the details. This will give the child tools to conceptualize a sense of place within a larger family tree and a sense of continuity with their ancestors.
 - Create rituals. Light a candle on a special date, scrapbook, or write a letter.
 - Remember, through your actions, you are giving your child the tools to navigate their open adoption relationships throughout their childhood and into their adulthood.

Gillian Freney has been a counselor/mediator at OA&FS since 2001. Prior to this, Gillian served as an OA&FS board member from 1998-2001.



Ask Astrid Q&A



Question: My son is 5 and his birthmother was in close contact for the first year and a half. Now, we only hear from her through e-mail once or twice a year. I want to talk about my child's birthmother with my son, but he does not ask too many questions. When should I talk about his birthmother and how much should I say?

Astrid: Because your son is not asking questions does not mean he is not thinking about his birthmother or does not have questions. In fact, it is very possible he does have questions but may not feel comfortable asking. It is important to teach children they do not have to be the initiators of conversation. A good rule of thumb is: if your child has to ask, then you have waited too long to bring it up. Children often feel they are crossing the loyalty boundary when initiating conversation about birthmothers. It was not until my early 20's that

ASK ASTRID continues on page 6

it REALLY dawned on me that my adopted mom and dad even thought about my birthparents/family. Yet, now I know they probably did and still do all the time! Even when talking with children who have a lot of open communication, they still report not always feeling 'safe' talking about their feelings around adoption.

The first step in helping your son feel comfortable talking with you about his birthmother is to figuratively "set a place at the table" for his birthmother. Even if your son's birthmother is not physically present, she holds a presence in your everyday life. That way your son will know that his birthmom is on your mind too. As you prepare to have a conversation with him, it is helpful to reflect on what the absence of your son's birthmother means to you. By processing your own feelings, and talking about them openly, you will be setting the stage for having an empathetic and comfortable conversation with your son. In this way, you'll convey to your child that you are a safe and compassionate recipient of his feelings. This can be more easily achieved by practicing expressing your thoughts with a close friend, your partner, a mentor, another adoptive parent, an adult adoptee, or another birthparent. As you identify and articulate your thoughts, you will normalize adoption issues for your child. Soon you will find your voice and feel comfortable initiating conversation with your son. Some simple phrases you may want to practice are:

- I wish (birthmom name) was here to see this.
- If I could talk (birthmom's name) right now I would tell her...
- I miss (birthmom's name).
- Today is a special day (birthday, holiday, mother's day...) and I am really thinking about (birthmom's name).
- I am going to write a letter to (birthmom's name).

By modeling this for your child, he will find his own voice over time. As this happens, you'll be able to talk about how you both feel about the absence of his birthmom. In addition, you can also talk about memories and photos of the positive contact that was experienced in the first year and a half of his life.

Question: My daughter is 6 and we have had no contact with her birthmother at all. I feel both angry and sad with my daughter's birthmom. I want to be positive, but I blame her for the lack of contact and, at the same time, I'm embarrassed to have these feelings. Do you have suggestions about how to deal with these feelings so when I talk to my daughter it doesn't show?

Astrid: It is really wonderful you are willing to speak the truth about your feelings and ask this really tough question. You are not alone. I get this type of question more often than not because, in addition to all of the rewards, there is a component to adoption that is characterized by grief, pain and loss. It is important to understand that just asking this question is an indication that you are moving in the right direction, from blame to understanding and ultimately towards compassion. Don't hide your feelings. It is extremely important to talk with your daughter about sad feelings, even angry feelings. What better way to give permission for your daughter to express her feelings than by example? In this way, you are modeling healthy ways to express feelings. Practice using I statements: "There are times when I feel angry that your birthmom has not contacted us, and it makes me feel sad." It is okay to stop there. The goal is to model expressing feelings, not to encourage the child to feel the same.

Question: We adopted two children and luckily have great relationships with both of their birthmothers. We have a good relationship with our daughter's birthfather, but have never had contact with our son's birthfather. Our son just turned 3 and is feeling left out when his sister's birthfather comes to visit. How can we create a safe space for him to ask questions and feel sad that his birthfather is not in contact?

Astrid: You can practice and model grief for your son by saying: "I'm sad that your birthfather is not in our life. I wish he was here." Modeling like this for your son creates a safe place for him to express feelings. It's important not to speculate why your son's birthfather is absent. Avoid statements that begin with: "Maybe," "I think", or "I bet." It is hard to avoid this type of compassionate speculation because your instinct is to try and ease the pain for your child. However, in the long run, this is not helpful for the child who may latch on to these speculations as truth. Assure him that you will always be emotionally available as he processes his adoption experience.

Astrid Dabbeni has served on OA&FS' board of directors and worked for Oregon Post Adoption Resource Center. Currently, Astrid is a board member of Northwest Adoptive Families Association and is the cofounder of Adoption Mosaic, where she designs and leads workshops for adoptive parents, activity groups for children and teens, and an adult adoptee movie group. Astrid's interest in adoption is rooted in her personal experience of being adopted from Colombia when she was 4 years old. Please e-mail questions for Astrid to kimh@openadopt.org.



Openness From A to Z

By: Carol Merwin, Adoptive Mother and OA&FS Boardmember

Within the OA&FS community there is great diversity in what open adoption relationships look like. On one end of the spectrum, adoptive families can have a close relationship with both birthparents. On the other end of the spectrum, there can be virtually no contact. And there is everything in between—close connection to only one birthparent; regular yet infrequent contact; sporadic contact; a loving relationship over a long distance. Relationships also change with time—a birthfather that was unknown may surface when trust builds; a geographic move may change the frequency of visits; a birthparent that struggles with alcohol and drugs may be in and out of contact; or a birthparent may take on new life responsibilities, such as starting a family. Given this wide range of experience what “counts” as open adoption?

Though all adoptions are different, they can all be open adoptions if they maintain a culture of openness. A “culture of openness” means:

- You are meeting the needs of your child by acknowledging and honoring the role of their birthparents, whether they are present in your life or not.
- You hold the birthparents in your heart for the valuable role they play in your family.
- You deal with your adoption experience without secrecy and shame—you share what you know with honesty and accuracy (in a way that is developmentally appropriate for your child).
- You embrace what the birthparents have to offer your child; if not now, then potentially in the future.

- You help your child tell their story and frame the experience they’re having in a positive way.
- You keep the best interests of your child at heart with what you say and do in regard to their birthparents. If things are not ideal, you trust that problems can be worked out.
- You don’t make assumptions and judgments about the birthparents; instead you show compassion and consideration. You hold them in your thoughts in a loving way and recognize that everyone is doing the best they can, in what can be a complicated relationship.
- You create a relationship with extended birth family to help meet your child’s need for connection, if the opportunity is present.
- You create opportunities for contact when you can and always offer a warm welcome.

No matter what level of openness you maintain, this community includes you and your experience. We value your participation and your perspective. So strive for the best open adoption relationships you can create, do your best to work with whatever develops, and know OA&FS is here to support you and your child. We want your participation in surveys, articles, workshops and gatherings, and would like to help you maintain a culture of openness.

Carol Merwin is actively involved in the adoption community through her volunteer work with OA&FS and NAFA, and through her friendships with other adoptive families. She enjoys a loving and supportive relationship with her daughter’s birthparents and their families.



Adoptive Families: Do you have less openness in your adoption than you anticipated (or no contact at all)?

- **You are not alone**
- **Your story is important**
- **We want to hear from you**

OA&FS wants to gather your insights as part of an effort to make our program more inclusive of your experience and that of your child. Please contact us at openness@openadopt.org and a Culture of Openness Committee Member will respond to you directly.

Agency Happenings

Welcome Kim

Kim Heavener has joined the OA&FS team as our new Development Director. Previously, she was Marketing Manager for Planned Parenthood of the Columbia/Willamette. Welcome!

Thank you Erika!

Erika is a licensed massage therapist in the Eugene area who has generously donated one free massage to each OA&FS birthparent in the Eugene area. Please help us thank Erika by booking a massage appointment with her today! Call (541) 343-4931.

Moving on from .com to .org

Please note all of our e-mail addresses have changed from openadopt.com to openadopt.org.

Do you have space?

OA&FS is searching for space for our monthly seminars in both Portland and Seattle. Please contact Kim if you have a conference or meeting room that would be available two days a month. Call (503) 226-4870 or e-mail kimh@openadopt.org.

Give a Gift to Birthmothers

Our annual Lifegivers Retreat will be held on June 9, 2007. The Lifegivers Retreat encourages birthmothers to designate a day for self-care, relaxation and connection with one another. We help birthmothers along with lots of pampering, good food and discussion.

We will hold a raffle this year and give away fun prizes such as "Movie Night" (movie tickets and popcorn) and "A Day at the Spa" (assorted bath products). **This year we are asking our OA&FS community to donate specifically to the raffle prizes.** Let us know what creative ideas you have for prizes! A general donation to the Lifegivers Retreat would also be much appreciated, and will help make this an accessible and meaningful way for birthmothers to connect. Please contact Amy at (503) 226-4870 or amy@openadopt.org.

May 12th: Honor Birthmothers

Recognize your child's birthmother on this special day. Beautiful cards with messages perfect for birthmothers are available through BirthMomBuds at: www.heartmarkdesigns.com/bmoms_day.htm.

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In This Edition:

- 1 Note From the Director
- 1 Openness Without Contact?
- 3 Out of Touch
- 4 Honoring Sibling Connections
- 5 Tool Kit for Creating Openness
- 5 Ask Astrid
- 7 Openness From A to Z