

## Feeling at Home in your Open Adoption

by **Shari Levine, OA&FS Executive Director**

For years I had the pleasure of attending national open adoption conferences that were spearheaded by **Jim Gritter**. Jim is considered “the father of open adoption” due to his long-standing devotion to the field. He is among the original pioneers who challenged and ultimately changed adoption thirty years ago. Since then he’s not only helped to form and nurture open adoptions professionally, but he’s also dedicated tremendous thought to understanding what makes open adoptions thrive. It was this enthusiasm and heart-felt exploration that provided such a source of inspiration to all that attended the conferences he hosted. I was deeply disappointed when Jim retired from Catholic Charities several years ago. His presence has been sorely missed.

Fortunately, Jim Gritter has recently written a book called, **Hospitious Adoption**, and is back on the speaking circuit. I was so pleased to hear him present about his new book at a conference last fall in Virginia. Afterwards, I invited him to come to Portland to share his insights and experiences with all of you. We are thrilled to announce that he’s agreed to speak to our open adoption community on April 15th.

Since the term “open adoption” is now so commonly

### Get Inspired April 15

Please join us for an interactive Q&A with renowned author and open adoption advocate **Jim Gritter!**

Learn about hospitious adoption and the ethics of hospitality. Event will be held on Sun. April 15, 1-4:00 pm at Legacy Meridian Hospital.

Admission is \$10 per person, reservations required. RSVP by Mon. April 9, 1-800-772-1115.



Renowned Author Jim Gritter

used in our culture to reflect a wide spectrum of experiences, it no longer describes the quality of an adoption. Consequently, we need a new lens to describe our philosophy and our unique open adoption model. What are the components of a high quality, fulfilling open adoption? In his book, “Hospitious Adoption” Jim Gritter explores the concept of hospitality as a way to qualify the components of a satisfying and meaningful open adoption experience. The giving and receiving among adoptive parents, birthparents and ultimately the open adoptee, is implicit in the model of hospitality, and is at the core of every high-quality open adoption. ■

## Developing Resiliency: Seven Core Beliefs

by **Katie R. Stallman, LICSW, CGE**

People who are part of a close and loving open adoption seem to have a little something extra in their back pockets that makes their relationship work no matter what. What is that something extra? How do those people do it?

We’ve seen participants in a successful open adoption develop an unflinching ability to hone in on what’s important in life. They possess a gratitude and graciousness that seems above and beyond the norm. They’ve created an unconditional regard for each other that can’t be rocked regardless of the trial. This gives them an amazing ability to always hold the child the as witness in their interactions with one another. They’ve developed resiliency.

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## Thank you for bringing us together ...

Dear Shari Levine and everyone at OA&FS,  
After more than a decade, our open adoptions with our daughters' birthparents are still going strong!

In the past year, we had two occasions that made us especially appreciate **Open Adoption & Family Services** (OA&FS) and all the wonderful work you do in bringing families together.

Our oldest daughter **Rose**, now age 11, was able to meet new members of her birth family and spend time with other members she already knows. Rose met her baby nephew, **Parker**, the son of her older sister. She also spent the day rollerskating with **Emily**, another sister from her birth family.

Meanwhile, **Renee**, now age 9, got to be a participant in the wedding of her birthmother **Sarah**. Both Renee and Rose were flower girls, walking down the aisle just moments before the bride herself. Sarah made sure the girls were included in the wedding photos and were treated as special members of the family.

Along with Sarah and her husband, Renee's grandparents spent the weekend with us. Together, we attended a church service where we were proud to introduce them to the entire congregation.

We feel so blessed to look back on the past 10-plus years and realize what an amazing extended family we have. Thank you, thank you, thank you for bringing us all together! We are forever grateful and think of you and your good work often. Keep it going strong for all those yet to come who don't even know how much they'll appreciate your help in years from now.



Rose Meeting Parker



Sarah and Renee



Phil, Renee, Rose, Gayle

Yours truly,  
**Phil and Gayle,**  
December 2011

*Developing Resiliency cont...*

Open adoption relationships are among the most resilient in our culture due to the inherent focus on honesty, compassion and communication. Everyone is invested in meeting the evolving needs of the child, and therefore invested in seeing the relationship flourish. To learn more, I talked with Barb, Claire, and Danessa, who generously shared their insights for this article. I'd like to thank them (as well as the males in this family who have all been instrumental in their success-Steve, Rod, and James) and the many other resilient participants we have been privileged to see in action over the years at Open Adoption & Family Services (OA&FS).

### Resiliency Fosters Ability to Cope

Resiliency refers to the way in which individuals cope with stress or adversity and are able to "bounce back" and recover from some kind of shock or disturbance. Psychologists studying child development have examined why some individuals seem more adaptable to change than others. Michael Ungar's recent article in *The Psychotherapy Networker* explains that researchers found, "Those who exhibited the most resiliency were the kids who behaved in ways that allowed them to experience self-esteem, maintain attachments to others, and enjoy opportunities to exercise personal control in meaningful ways."

Ungar may as well have been writing about the families of open adoption: the children, both sets of parents, and the constellation members who support these very natural, yet still unconventional bonds. Beyond their innate strength, sense of curiosity and courage-they are people who find meaning in their choices.

By the very nature of their choices, open adoption participants are resilient people. "In order to get to adoption as a choice, you have to be resilient to begin with," explained adoptive mother Claire. "It is such a deliberate decision on both sides."

Claire and her husband felt they faced intense judgment at the time they began exploring adoption. Prior to choosing to work with OA&FS, she and her husband inadvertently attended a meeting for adoptees and birthparents who felt deeply wronged by the adoption systems they worked with. "People were really, really, angry," she said. "I wondered, why were they so angry?" She could have run the other way, but instead, Claire sat down and listened. She left that meeting deeply impacted and made a choice that open adoption would be the only path.

That path was one also chosen by Danessa, birthmother of Claire's daughter Carolyn. "I went through so much," Danessa noted as she described the emotions of placing

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## Carolyn's Family Constellation

two children for adoption within two years. Danessa credits her internal strength as a person, the addition of her loving husband to her life, and her absolute commitment to the daughters she placed as giving her the fortitude to stay connected.

"It is a big responsibility," she added.

When things are difficult, Danessa has oft relied on a mantra from her mother: "And this too shall pass."

Open adoption participants take sometimes untenable and overwhelming situations and turn them into something meaningful.

Nobody plans on becoming a "birthparent." Danessa never anticipated making that choice not once, but twice. And most adoptive parents do not embrace adoption as their first choice for becoming a parent. Adoption is fraught with loss, we all know this. But despite the challenges, successful open adoption participants take back the control that was taken from them. They end up with relationships that are "bullet-proof." These relationships are indeed resilient! The love, the gratitude, and the high regard that many adoptive and birthparents have for one another, despite their many differences, is impressive.

Children of open adoption also find meaning in the choices that were made on their behalf. "It is my family," they tell you. "This is just the way it is." Claire and Danessa would tell you that Carolyn is an example. At almost 12-years-old, she seamlessly integrates the relationship she has with both her mothers. Claire and Danessa take pleasure in watching the unique relationship Carolyn has with each of them thrive. When other adults in the family seem to struggle with things privately, Carolyn is the one in the middle smiling. Carolyn easily embraces the idea that "family" consists of the people who love you and are in your life. "She is so adaptable and loving," they both remarked separately, when describing Carolyn. From the beginning, the adults in Carolyn's life modeled this adaptability for her. This kind of resiliency is modeled countless times by the birth and adoptive families making this choice.



With Mom Claire



With Birthmom Danessa



Carolyn and Grandpa Howard



Carolyn with her Birthsiblings

It's not possible to be intimately connected to people without strong feelings, and these feelings can be intense. However, open adoption participants make sense of and find meaning in these feelings. Daniel Siegel, M.D. a leading neuroscientist and researcher, often talks about people taking the "high road" in their reasoning and subsequent emotional and behavioral

responses. This means that people have the capacity to use higher forms of reasoning before they react to triggers. "The low road" of course refers to the reactions typical of the more primitive parts of our brain, or "reptilian brain," as it's called. The key to resiliency in open adoption is choosing the "higher road" of reasoning when facing challenge.

Are there challenges? Sometimes. Claire and Danessa are wonderful examples of open adoption participants who found a way to grow their relationship and maintain a loving connection for

Carolyn's sake in spite of any challenge. Both indicated they are closer now than they ever were before. Yet a move across the ocean for five years, a divorce between Claire and her husband, Danessa's marriage, and birth of Danessa's two additional children after Carolyn's adoption have made for some interesting issues. Danessa also placed another daughter, Rachael, with Barb and Steven, prior to having Carolyn. There are many layers. So what is their secret?

### The Seven Core Beliefs

Barb, Claire, and Danessa did not have a name for their fortitude, but conversations with all of them revealed people who are deeply rooted in specific philosophical beliefs about openness. The Seven Core Beliefs are a concrete reflection of the principles these women embrace with ease. All open adoption participants, no matter the spectrum of their contact with one another, can incorporate these beliefs (a values-based lens) into their way of thinking. Families who embrace these ideas can better

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tolerate the complexities of open adoption relationships. These beliefs act as the “backbone” of a successful open adoption relationships. They are statements or thoughts to be referred to in times of chaos, challenge, or confusion. In essence, using the Core Beliefs and a values-based perspective are ways to gain mastery over whatever challenge one faces, thereby ensuring and even increasing the resiliency of the relationship.

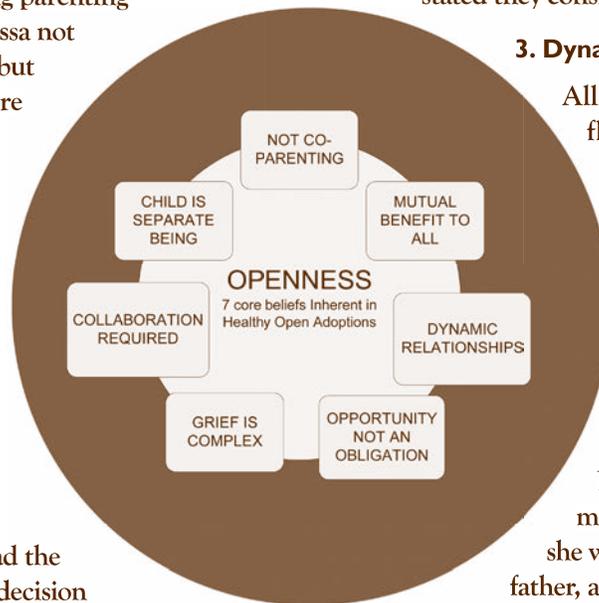
### 1. Not Co-Parenting

Open adoption is not co-parenting and both sides need to realize this from the start. Adoptive parents need to feel like the parents and act accordingly. Some adoptive parents are unnecessarily stressed by the wishes or suggestions of birthparents and need help remembering that they are indeed the parent. And birthparents are no longer in the role of making parenting decisions. Barb, Claire, and Danessa not only understand this distinction, but they also accept that they, and more importantly the children they are parenting, are enriched by the role each plays in their lives. Danessa noted that it was a huge “reality check” when Claire told her she, her husband, and Carolyn would be moving to England with Carolyn when she was not yet two-years-old. “It was an amazingly overwhelming moment. I felt like they were taking her so far away, from me,” Danessa said. But Danessa also had the wisdom to support them in their decision and view it from their perspective. “I didn’t have any control over it because of the decision I made. And I had to deal with that.” Claire was amazed by Danessa’s support during their five years away (only two years were initially planned) in England. “Her understanding, lack of judgment, and supportiveness is a testament to who she is as a person,” Claire said.

### 2. Mutual Benefit to All

Agreements about openness need to come from a mutual understanding of the benefits to both the child and the adults involved. Openness gives adoptive parents so much information they would not normally have, and deeply informs adoptive parents as they make parenting choices. Barb, Claire and Danessa each revealed a deep admiration and respect for one another. They enjoy one another. Claire delights in seeing her daughter with Danessa. “They look so much alike,” she proudly reported. Claire also stated that Carolyn really needs to see herself reflected

back at her. This is something joyful for Claire, not threatening. Barb added the joy of seeing Rachael with her siblings has been a total surprise. “Seeing the joy they all experience when together is really neat,” she said. This past summer Rachael and Carolyn spent a week together at Girl Scout Camp and are spearheading a relationship all their own. Rachael, an only child in an adoptive home and the only child of Barb’s, happily tells her friends at school about her siblings and all the fun they have together, sometimes to their confusion. “This is a source of pride for her,” Barb explained. She also said, “Rachael seems peaceful and relaxed in her whole body after a visit with her siblings.” What parent doesn’t want that for their child? Adoptive and birthparents who believe they also personally benefit from contact with one another are much better able to manage the very normal personality differences we all have. Barb, Danessa and Claire each stated they consider the other a dear friend.



### 3. Dynamic Relationships

All relationships have an ebb and flow. This is normal. There will be moments of closeness and intense connection and moments when all the parties feel more distant for whatever reasons. Wise participants realize this and accept it. When Carolyn moved to England with her parents for five years it certainly changed the dynamic of their relationship with Danessa. Danessa credits Claire with making sure that Carolyn knew who she was during that time. Claire, Claire’s father, and Carolyn, visited with Danessa every time they were back in the U.S. Carolyn always seemed happy to see Danessa, and remembered her. “We talked with Carolyn a lot during that time about who Danessa was and we always showed her pictures,” Claire stated. But the visits weren’t as often as Danessa would have liked. The distance felt harder and it required more effort on all their parts—letters, pictures, emails, and phone calls. This was also a time of intense pressure for Claire. The family moved to England as a result of a job opportunity. Claire’s marriage also began to weather, leading to a separation and an eventual divorce. Danessa recognized and was able to empathize with Claire, despite having her own feelings about the distance. Since Claire and her family’s return to the U.S., all parties believe they have grown closer than ever before and the relationship continues to evolve in new ways.

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#### **4. Opportunity, Not an Obligation**

Using a values-based lens requires participants to view challenges and complexity as an opportunity for growth. Hence, they fare much better in the relationship when there is stress. They don't see it as a sign of weakness, but rather a time for learning about the other. When one views the relationship as something they "want to be a part of" as opposed to something "they have to be a part of" the benefits are huge! Barb, Claire, and Danessa each take joy in all of the unique relationships afforded them through their open adoption connection. Carolyn and Rachael both spend time with Danessa, Danessa's husband and the two children they are parenting. Danessa's daughter Chanel is now 10 and J.J. is seven. Claire might take Danessa's daughter, Chanel, along with her for a day of skiing. Carolyn spends time overnights with Danessa. Rachael's family, although further away, is often included in the mix. Barb appreciated that from the beginning, she has felt Claire and Danessa include her and her family in whatever ways seems right. Rachael was just a year-old when Danessa placed Carolyn with Claire. "None of us had a template for how that would work," Barb recalls when thinking about the joining of two adoptive families in addition to the birthfamily. She went on to explain that Claire really took the initiative with her, inviting the whole family to stay with them when they came in town to visit Danessa. "We have seen one another far more than I thought we would. It has been wonderful," she added.

#### **5. Grief is Complex**

The grief inherent in adoption for all involved is a tricky, often covert, and unconscious element lurking behind the initial reactions and feelings of all involved. The values-based lens requires one to accept that grief is normal, that it sometimes surprises us, and that it isn't something to fear. Rather, something that requires attention and care. For the parents interviewed, the most surprising issue of late has been the grief of Danessa's third daughter, Chanel, the daughter she is parenting. Chanel loves spending time with her siblings. Though she accepts the boundaries of the relationship and realizes they are sisters, just not sisters who live with her, it is often difficult. This doesn't mean that any of them need to do anything differently. It just means Danessa needs to spend time listening to Chanel and validating the struggles she sometimes feels.

#### **Collaboration Required**

When conflicts, disagreements, struggles, or massive life changes arise both parties need to be heard, validated, educated, or supported. Ultimately, everybody needs to remember that the relationship is a collaboration. There are often lots of people involved with differing needs and attitudes. Claire and Danessa learned a great deal about

collaboration and working through their fears when Claire and her husband divorced. Claire remembers feeling anxious to tell Danessa. She felt she had failed. To others who may be struggling with big changes, she offers this: "Life is messy. It doesn't go the way we planned. Be non-judgmental of yourself and others. And don't be self-critical when things aren't perfect. Is divorce ideal? No, of course not. But is it real? Yes. Can you make the best of it? Yes," Claire explained. When asked about how she felt about the divorce, Danessa agreed it wasn't what anybody anticipated, but that it really hasn't changed things for her and the relationship with Carolyn or Carolyn's father. "We're all still friends and still share meals and events with one another," she added. If anything, she sees their family being less stressed. Danessa further empathized that Carolyn's parents must have felt so vulnerable when telling her about their divorce. She understood Claire's initial feelings of failure. "But we aren't perfect either," Danessa exclaimed! "We're a group who understands," she said. Barb echoed the need for collaboration. Organizing visits that include three families and five children isn't easy. "It takes much less emotional effort since we all agree it's important, but the logistics keep getting harder."

#### **6. Child is Separate Being**

All parents, no matter how a child enters or leaves their immediate family, need to be cognizant of this principle all the time. The children of open adoption are their own people with their own wishes, interests, and needs. This belief requires adults to successfully tease out what their needs are versus the needs of their child. ALL the parents involved need to spend time thinking about the reality of their expectations and whether or not their child is truly free to be who he or she wants to be. Children are not owned or possessed, a value Barb noted was emphasized by Jim Gritter in "The Spirit of Open Adoption". This was pivotal in her decision to choose open adoption. As an older sister to two children who joined their family through closed adoption, Barb had an early sense of what an honor and privilege it is to be part of an adoptive family, but also how critical it is to honor the needs of the children involved. Danessa and Claire also clarified this value as they worked through the challenge of a major move to England that lasted longer than anticipated. "The way I coped with Carolyn's sudden move was to keep focused on what an amazing opportunity it was for her. Carolyn could now experience so many things I would not have been able to provide," Danessa stated. Though it was a painful time for Danessa, she knew it wasn't about her. "We all work very hard to keep Carolyn in the center. Everything has been easier when we think that way," Claire added.



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*Developing Resiliency cont...*

### **7. Using the Core Beliefs to Increase Resiliency**

Many open adoption participants, as Barb, Claire, and Danessa demonstrated for us in this article, very naturally embrace the Core Beliefs. For those who do not, look to the Core Beliefs to prepare for an open adoption relationship if you are not yet part of one, to organize your own thoughts about the relationship you are already a part of, and to look at these beliefs as a mechanism for grounding when your relationship feels unsatisfying, tense, or challenged. Claire noted, “The more accepting you are the better. There are no guarantees about anything. And everything worth having is a risk.” She went on to state the relationships she shares with all involved in Carolyn’s open adoption are such great opportunities for all of them. “It is a wonderful way to build a family,” she said. Danessa added that communication in her open adoption relationships remains paramount. “Hiding things or making things seem better than the way they are is not the way to go. You have to say where you are, how you feel, and then deal with the consequences,” she added. As Barb, Claire, and Danessa all accept, life is messy! “You are forced to stretch beyond your normal mindset,” Barb said, “and this is good: good for building empathy, good for the value it places on people, and good for your

brain!” However, as they and so many other open adoption participants have proven, this group is as naturally resilient as the relationships they forge. Resiliency is not inborn, it is a choice one makes everyday to use a values-based lens about how you are going to feel, think, and then proceed.

### **What Qualities Often Comprise a Values-Based Lens in Open Adoption?**

- Honesty
- Communication
- Empathy
- Commitment
- Trust
- Compassion
- Respect
- Understanding
- Flexibility
- Child-Centeredness

*Katie R. Stallman, LICSW, CGE worked as an agency counselor from 2001 to 2008 before returning in January of 2011 as the half-time Seattle Regional Supervisor. She also independently facilitates the Bringing Baby Home workshop for adoptive parents.*

# Milestones and Changes

by Bethany, OA&FS Birthmother



Bethany and Son Sam

Open adoption is a wonderful alternative to closed adoption and foster care. It's also very beneficial for those who are already parenting and don't have the means to parent another child.

Being part of the open adoption process has given me more direction in figuring out what my goals in life are. I have been better able to understand myself, my feelings, my thoughts, and my life because of it. It has given me more strength than I knew I had.

Since my daughter Claire's open adoption in 2009, my life has gone through several milestones and changes. For one, my son is back in my home. He is considered disabled and his removal and temporary placement in foster care when I was pregnant, were a large part of why I chose open adoption for my daughter. Now, his school and medications have been stabilized and I have full custody of my son again.

Another important change in our life has been that I returned to school. I finished a computer literacy certification last month and will finish my associate's degree in June. I am planning on earning a Child and Family Studies degree, then going on to earn a master's in Social Work or Counseling. Additionally, after two years of seeking work after being laid off, I was able to find a part-time job again.

After the adoption, my relationship with my family changed slowly over time. I have been able to



Claire, Mom Brenda, Dad Kent, Brother Jordan



Claire and Birthmom Bethany

talk to my father again after nearly a year of not talking because he was upset with my choice to place. My eldest sister was upset with me for a while too, because she had hoped she would raise my daughter.

A year after the adoption, I met my present partner, who understands my feelings regarding my daughter's adoption, supports me in my choice and supports my relationship growth with Claire and her family. My partner is great and supports me in my open adoption, my son's life, my education and my work. Now, I have started to help other birthparents in understanding their feelings about their adoptions.



Proud Brother Jordan

In spite of all these changes, my relationship with Claire and her family hasn't shifted much. We still share four visits throughout the year like we agreed to, and we were even able to work out an extra visit when my mother came to town from Canada. I talk with Claire's mom on Facebook, phone calls or texts: :). If anything, my coursework has given me a better understanding of my feelings regarding my open adoption, how my son is dealing with it, and how my daughter may later feel about her adoption and placement.

Claire has grown into "The World of Toddler" now! She has an independent personality like many of the ladies in my family, myself included. She is not scared of my son or I, but I don't think she is sure of who we are yet. She is sure when we see her that we will love her up and give her gifts! She does not like to be held too much, but she will let me hold her unless she is sleepy. At those

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times, only mommy will do.

When he was younger, my son Sam was always quite sad by our visits when it was time to leave, and didn't understand exactly why Claire couldn't come home with us. Now that he's older, he is more content with her placement. Likewise, I don't think that Claire understands that Sam is her brother quite yet, but she plays with him when we have visits and he protects her as any brother would. I think she would be okay on her own without his protection: she is feisty!



*Claire and Birthsibling Sam*



*Carousel Time with Dad Kent*

I know Claire's parents, Brenda and Kent, are as respectful of my life as I am of theirs. We have all grown together in our relationship. Regardless of the changes they've gone through in their life, nothing has interfered with our openness. In addition to Claire, they have a son and they are in an open adoption with their son's birthparents, too. I know that he was able to share a first visit in a long time with his birthmom recently. This was great for

him, though I think he may have some wonders in his head about my relationship with Claire and his relationship with his birthmother. Brenda and Kent have never hidden anything from Claire or her brother.

So far, my overall open adoption experience has gone quite well. What I wanted for my children has come true, and my wishes for Claire and Sam have been fulfilled. I am positive my open adoption relationship with Claire will grow fantastically over time. I'm sure that I will be there for the important times in her life, and hopeful that as she grows her bond with her brother Sam will grow as well. Claire will always know who we are and have her questions answered truthfully. She has wonderful parents who are open and loving. For those who embrace all parts of it, open adoption can be the greatest experience in one's life. ■

### **Help Make Birthmothers' Day Special: Donate to the Birthmothers' Retreat**

Birthmothers from all generations will be gathering in Portland and Eugene this spring for sharing, support and fun! Please help OA&FS create an event befitting this special group of women with a donation of any amount. Just use the enclosed envelope or go to [openadopt.org](http://openadopt.org) and click on "support us". Thank you!



*Bethany: OA&FS Birthmother Mentor*

## *Communicating to Resolve Issues*

Open adoption is a uniquely wonderful experience that brings many positive things to light. Nothing is easy, and open adoption relationships are no different.

I would encourage birth and adoptive parents

who are just starting an open adoption, to be honest and communicative if you'd like your relationship to weather changes well. Don't say what you think the other person wants to hear, tell them the truth and keep your promises. If both sides are truly open, the relationship bond will be strong enough to adapt to any change!

If the birthparents come into a situation requiring the relationship to change, I hope adoptive parents would offer an ear to listen. Don't fear us, our feelings and frustrations don't come from wanting

to take away the gift we gave to you. Most of the time we're very content in our choice to place and we want the relationship to work as much as you do.

To birthparents, I would encourage them to realize that if something's not working, it's okay to speak up for yourself and your wishes. No one can read your mind! If you come to bumpy patches, talk it out. Talk with your counselors, a support group, or others who understand you, and be communicative with the adoptive parents. If you're afraid to talk with them on your own, contact your OA&FS counselor and set up a mediation session if need be. ■

*Open Adoption & Family Services (OA&FS) offers peer mentor programs to birthmothers and birthfathers who place through the agency. If you'd like to talk with a fellow OA&FS birthparent or volunteer to serve as a mentor, please contact us: 1-800-772-1115 or [information@openadopt.org](mailto:information@openadopt.org).*