

The power of choice and validation in open adoption.

by Shari Levine

What are the core components of a genuine and fulfilling open adoption? I set out to identify and explore the unique ingredients that birthparents and adoptive parents bring to the table to create not just a good open adoption, but a great open adoption. I wanted to learn more about how we as an agency can foster and develop those key qualities.

I interviewed two pioneer birthparents, Melissa and Garrett, who 20 years ago invested their hopes and dreams in a new adoption model, called open adoption. Join me as we step into their world, their perceptions and experiences that have spanned the last two decades and profoundly touched the lives of many.

As I interviewed them, I set my original questions aside and followed their lead which uncovered new themes that I hadn't considered. The thread that brought together the stories of Melissa and Garrett, the children they placed and the adoptive parents they entrusted them to, were the elements of choice and validation in their open adoptions.

Interview: Birthfather Garrett

Shari: Can you briefly describe your story?

Garrett: When I was 18 my girlfriend got pregnant. I had moved away so when I received the call, I was quite surprised. I realized what we were going to do wasn't really up to me because I had different choices than my girlfriend did.

She had, as I saw it, three choices: she could have the baby and keep it, she could have an abortion, or place the baby in an adoption. I had two choices - whether I was going to be involved or whether I wasn't.

I felt being involved was the responsible thing to do. We settled

pretty quickly on doing an adoption as the best option for us in the situation that we were in. We also had a discussion about the differences between an open and a closed adoption. This was the first time I had ever heard of an open adoption. There are many adopted people in my immediate family and in my extended family, but all of those were closed, so that was what I was familiar with.

Initially I was not excited about the idea of an open adoption, but my girlfriend was more astute than I was about the emotional realities of the situation. She talked to me about open adoption, I read some books and materials on it, and ultimately came around to the idea. I knew that this child would realize that somewhere out there was a birthfather—it's not like that can be kept a secret or should be kept a secret in my opinion. I felt that I should give the choice to the child about how he wanted to approach the situation, and if it were closed I would be taking that choice away from him.

Ultimately we settled on doing an open adoption. We found the agency and a family that we really liked. I will never forget going to their house, sitting on their couch talking with them and me just feeling as awkward as I have ever felt, and just thinking "oh please, I hope they like me, I hope they don't think I'm weird". We talked and apparently I didn't scare them off with my awkwardness - we chose them and they chose us.

Garrett and Fin: THEN AND NOW.



After Fin was born, we did the placement and I thought of that as the end of the story – I now realize it was just the beginning.

He is now 19 years old, the same age I was when he was born, which is absolutely bizarre. It's been one of the great joys and privileges of my life to be involved like I wanted to be, to see him grow up and have the things that I hoped he would: a happy childhood and good life.

Shari: So you were 19 and here was this relationship awaiting you. How did you feel about it?

Garrett: I was very anxious about what was going to be expected of me. I was already profoundly ashamed of not being able to give him what I thought he deserved and to some extent, I wasn't sure what I had to offer. He was going to have a father, who I admired and respected and had chosen in part for that reason.

Shari: You initially moved away to go to college and returned to the area, right?

Garrett: I came back to Portland in 2010. Fin was 11 at that time when I permanently moved back to the Northwest. Before that I was in school or having other adventures around the world. Every time I was in town I would always make a point to go see him, and really enjoyed doing that. Once we were back in the neighborhood so to speak, it made it a lot easier to do that.

Shari: What are some of the values that the adoptive parents brought to the table that made this work? There certainly are birthfathers that move away and never come back. What are some of the ways in which they welcomed you, and made you feel intrinsically valuable and accepted?



Fin (green shirt) with birthfather Garrett, adoptive mom Joell, brother Max, birthmother Katherine and adoptive dad Hans.

Garrett: His parents have always encouraged me to come and see him, and made me feel like I had something to offer him and the family as a whole. Over time I'd like to think that I lost some of my awkwardness and now when we're together it feels much more natural.

Shari: Often in open adoptions, the adoptive moms are very welcoming and gracious. They tend to reach out to the birth family and actively include them in their lives. I have a theory that it takes the adoptive dad also reaching out to help the birth dad feel like he's has a place in the family too.

Garrett: Yes, I agree. I remember when I took Fin out for lunch years ago and his father said to me, he just glows after he's with you. That really helped me. To see that Fin was happy and having the life that I thought he deserved, and that he wanted me to be a part of it, and that was important to him, made it all come together for me.

Shari: What other milestone moments have you had?

Garrett: This moment has always stuck out in my mind. It was Fin's 7th birthday party. We were at his house, and because of the nature of open adoption there's a lot of people there – double the amount I guess you would normally have. Fin and I were sitting at the kitchen table and I said, "So Fin now you're seven years old, what are your plans?" And he told me, "Well I'm going to tell you, but you have to guess". So he was writing down hints for me, like an acronym. He wrote T N F. I'm looking at T N F and I am looking at him and finally I say "Okay Fin, I give up – I don't know." And he said "Well, now that I'm seven I'm going to try new foods!"

That story has stuck in my mind, not just because it's a cute story, but because it was really a turning point for me personally. I remember sitting and thinking that what I hoped would happen, actually happened, that he was living a happy childhood in a stable family and trying new foods when he turned seven. Everything that I wanted for him seemed in that moment to be real.

Shari: Like his biggest challenge in life, was to try new foods!

Garrett: Right, yeah he might have to try a tangerine or something!

Shari: Can you talk about the extended family connections and the relationships that they have been created through your open adoption?

Garrett: The families have joined together. If I see one of Fin's parent's siblings, for example, it feels like meeting a relative at a family reunion – someone I don't see all the time, but I know them and they're family.

My wife and Joell are friends, they often talk and plan times for us to get together. My mother also is very involved and is integral in arranging things. Fin's birthmother is friends with my sisters, she still lives around here and we see her at gatherings. It feels like a big extended family with people to whom I feel related even though I know there is no blood relation.

Shari: Can you talk about some of those interconnections?

Garrett: Before Fin went off to college, my son Zach wanted to learn to play the drums. Fin is a very good drummer, so for several months we went to his house every Saturday and he'd have his drum lesson with his big brother. Fin came with us when we went to Disneyland. Also my daughter had a gymnastics tournament in Eugene so Fin came with us to that and cheered her on. My daughter and son were in Joell's music class for many years.

Shari: So Fin is at college now. What's he studying?

Garrett: I'm bursting with pride to say, that he was admitted to the jazz program which is very selective. He's a music major and lives in a special dorm with other music students and trundles his big ol' stand-up base all around campus.

Shari: So much has happened since Fin's birth. If you could go back in time, what would you tell your 19-year-old self?

Garrett: I would encourage myself to be there for him and I'd say to myself, "I'm looking back on it now and I can tell you that it will not only be valuable to him, but valuable to you too."

It's been an absolute joy and pleasure to be a part of his life. Every moment that I have with him, to me, is a privilege. I would tell myself to look forward to that because at the beginning – and I don't want to minimize this in any way – there's a sense of loss and a failure.

Shari: Do you think the negative stereotypes in our culture around adoption led you as a birthfather to feel that sense of failure?



Birthfather Garrett and birthgrandmother Lisa celebrate with Fin at his high school graduation.

Garrett: It wasn't the adoption that felt like the failure. And maybe it's because I already knew so many people who were adopted – people in my family, and some of my friends. But I did feel like I wasn't able to do what I was supposed to do – provide a normal stable home and have a job, for example. It was a sobering moment realizing, "Oh my God Garfield, you would not be a good father at this point". That's what really felt like a failure.

Shari: As you saw Fin thrive over the years was that sense of failing him lifted? Did you feel that you had created a family for him and that you are a part of that family?

Garrett: Yes, absolutely. That was part of the pleasure to me – of seeing what I hoped he would have – was the life and childhood that he did have. You have to let go of your ego a little bit and realize it's the important thing for him.

Shari: Do you think the values of inclusion and acceptance you felt from the adoptive parents, were the same core values that guided how they raised Fin?



Fin (in red shirt) with adoptive mom Joell, birthfather Garrett and adoptive dad Hans, (l-r).

Garrett: I do think so. I respect and admire both of them a lot and would even if there were no family relationship between us. They are wonderful people – wonderful parents. Honestly I often

try to model my own parenting, now that I am muddling through it, on the way that they are with Fin.

Shari: How would you describe Fin now: his personality, his traits, what he believes in?

Garrett: He is such a mix of me, his birthmother, and his parents. He's fairly reserved but also a very engaged person. He has a lot of interests, he's very smart in my view – maybe colored a little bit. One thing that I have really noticed when watching him relate to younger children is that he's so good at empathizing with them. It's something I really admire. He's very dedicated, very thoughtful. Like me, he overthinks a lot of things. I see it in my own kids too, "Well dad if dragons were real they would not be able to live in this climate because..." He's very analytical, but also intensely creative with the music career he is pursuing. I like everything about him.

Shari: How has your open adoption experience shaped you? How has it changed your view of family and parenting?

Garrett: It has profoundly affected me in every way. It made me more thoughtful than I might otherwise have been about when I was ready to have my own kids. I really felt proud to be at a point where I could raise kids. For me, that was a milestone.

It's made me more open to interacting with people. Having relationships is something I was very uncertain about at the beginning, and yet I got put into this situation where it was my responsibility to have relationships. Now it's one of the things I am most happy about in my life.

One distinct change is that initially I was opposed to the idea of an open adoption on the theory that it would be confusing and difficult and

weird. Now I have the opposite view – that a closed adoption is weird and confusing.

To see that Fin was happy and having the life that I thought he deserved, that he wanted me to be a part of it, and that was important to him made it all come together for me.

- Birthfather Garrett

Shari: What would you like the world to know about open adoption and specifically this model of open adoption? There's a lot of imposter open adoptions out there, where they're selling openness, but it's not very genuine, and that is apparent in the relationship that follows.

Garrett: I've spoken with women of an earlier generation of closed adoption and from what I've

gathered from their stories, they were given no choice. Every possible choice was taken from them.

I think that this is an infinitely better model. One of the things that attracted me to Hans and Joell, and to this agency in particular, was that the commitment to respect was real. And, the reason I came around to open adoption was out of a respect for Fin and the choices that I would either take from him or let him make himself. I wanted him to make the choices himself.

For me it's absolutely been positive; it's been what I hoped it would be. It's painful, particularly at the beginning. It's a loss that one has to reckon with, but there's a joy in the mourning.

Shari: Do you feel that it was the fact that you did reckon with that loss that enabled you to have this relationship?

Garrett: I do, and I also think that coming into this as a choice is what made it so positive. The respect I felt from his parents and this agency was very important to me. When people are given a choice and make that choice consciously, it's much easier to deal with the loss in that situation. As time went on all the reasons I made this choice turned out to be good reasons. I was very happy about that.



Fin with birthmother Katherine.

Shari: We often hear from the kids who were placed through our agency how powerful it is for them to know that their birthparents hand-selected their adoptive family. They were literally entrusted to this family; it wasn't random at all.

Garrett: Yeah, Absolutely. I'm not surprised to hear that that's important to them.

Shari: Now that Finn is starting to live this independent college life, do you think you'll still have a strong relationship with Hans and Joell? Do you have a friendship with them that is separate from Finn?

Garrett: Yes, I deeply admire both of them. I would be proud to be friends with them and see that relationship continuing. Since Finn is off at college now I think we're all figuring out how things will be the same and different. I'm looking forward to figuring it out.

Shari: Any other closing thoughts or takeaways?

Garrett: For me it's been fantastic in the sense that what I wanted for Finn I got to actually see him get, and still be a part of his life. Moving into the future is one of the most important things that I have in my life.

Shari: Where is everyone now?

Garrett: My wife and I and our three children live in Portland, as do Hans and Joell. I work as an attorney. Finn is going to college in Eugene.

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Garrett with wife Bayra and their children Nate, Zayaa and Zach.

A family is born.

Curious about how an open adoption placement begins? This video pulls back the curtain.

Fin's family participated in a video produced by OA&FS when Finn was 11. In this, his birthparents Garrett and Katherine recount their hospital experiences, and adoptive parents Joell and Hans share how they felt at the time that Finn was born and entrusted to them.

Their stories convey the rich emotion that forms the foundation of their relationship, and the mutual trust, respect and compassion each demonstrates. ■



Watch Video: The Placement and Entrustment Ceremony.

An Open Adoption Timeline: GARRETT & FIN.

be
brave



1999

In this photo taken for a newspaper article on open adoption feeling relieved that we found a family for Fin.

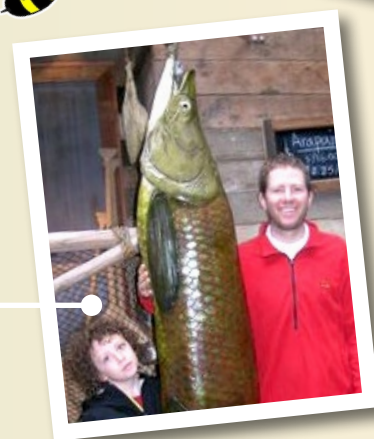


REMEMBER:
* RIGHT NOW *

Christmas at Fin's house - feeling happy to be included in the festivities.

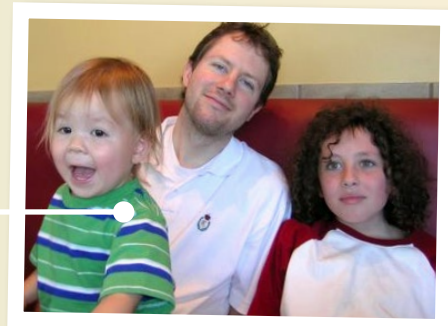


At the Oregon Forestry Center - enjoying taking Fin and his brother out for activities.



CELEBRATE
EVERY TINY
VICTORY

Back in the Northwest and glad to see Fin more often.



Fun times at Disneyland! Fin was a good babysitter for the little ones.

Feeling proud during Fin's senior year of high school. Things had really come full circle.



Photo Credit: Greg Wytcherley.

2018

FAMILY



Pioneer BIRTHPARENTS: MELISSA

... "Pioneer Birthparents" continued from Page 5

Interview: Birthmother Melissa

Shari: Where did your story start?

Melissa: I was 14 and a freshman in high school when I found out I was pregnant. Initially the birthfather and I planned to parent, and it wasn't until about 7 months into the pregnancy that we decided to consider adoption, but not before we went through many months of trying to figure out what parenting would look like and exploring every avenue and dealing with a lot of pushback from family and friends. The only way I would have considered adoption was through an open adoption.

Shari: What values have guided your open adoption relationship?

Melissa: It's evolved so much over the years. Now I can see how much Greg and Jan as adoptive parents were willing to meet us where we were at as birthparents. They accepted me for who I was and always seemed to genuinely value me and my importance in Brianna's life. They even accepted my imperfections and celebrated those too. We were and are a family: just like any biological family.

Looking back I also think that, I was doing the work of letting go of mothering my daughter and trusting them by releasing her into their care.

Shari: What qualities do you see from the adoptive parents that allowed you to do that?

Melissa: It was their willingness to value our place in her life that allowed me to feel I didn't have to prove myself, or prove my worth.

It wasn't just lip service, they actually walked that walk in terms of including us, and inviting us, and wanting us to be a part of their family. I didn't have to worry that at some point they were going to

exclude me from Brianna's life or from their lives. They were always very encouraging, welcoming and trusting of me—which allowed me to then reciprocate that.

Shari: They seemed to provide their unconditional acceptance to Brianna too, and she seems very secure in her adoption.

Melissa: Yes, she does appear to be quite comfortable in that part of her identity. It doesn't seem to be something that she grapples with at all.

Shari: What do you think people need to come to the table with in order to be successful in their open adoption?

Melissa: I would encourage all parties to come to the table with a genuine sense of curiosity, willingness to learn, and openness.

It really helps when everyone is open to the idea that we all have a

special and unique place in this child's life. The goal, ultimately, is to allow the child to explore all parts of themselves in a safe space and with a family that is loving and caring.

My philosophy is that if we walk through life thinking I, as an individual, am superior to this other human who walks on this planet with me—I just think that sets you up for all kinds of falsehoods and missed opportunities to really learn from other

Seeing how quickly and naturally we melded into one family helped to shift my idea of what it means to be a family and how people create families.

- Birthmother Melissa

Melissa and Brianna: THEN AND NOW.



people. Children can get so much value from so many different people and different experiences in life. Adoptive families can have so much to offer, but that doesn't have to replace something else.

As a parent in general, anytime that you set up a scenario where something is off limits or "we can't talk about it", children rail against that, nobody wants to be told that "you cannot have information about this". Anytime there is a hard stop—people generally don't like that. I don't think children, even from a young age, are any different.

Shari: If you think back to your 14- or 15-year-old self and the ideas that you had about family, how has your open adoption experience expanded those views?

Melissa: Seeing how quickly and naturally we melded into one family helped to shift my idea of what it means to be a family and how people create families. It's not like we "feel" like family or we're "sort of" like family, we are family and it's just as valid and genuine as any other.

Shari: In the beginning did you have a vision, or a hope, of who Brianna would become? How would you describe her now?

Melissa: She is incredibly well-rounded and a genuinely thoughtful person. She's super caring and really compassionate about all people's different experiences in life. She's a huge advocate for equality and human rights and all kinds of things that I couldn't have necessarily wished for her at that time, but now I am just super inspired by what a great person she is becoming and I'm sure that will continue to evolve.

We went to the Women's march together in D.C. It was such a profound experience to have this badass moment with my birth daughter and her friends, who are incredible and coming into their sense of themselves as young women.

Shari: How has your experience as a birthmom impacted your worldview?

My experience has certainly solidified my very strong beliefs that people need to be in control of their own reproductive decision-making because it is such a profoundly life-changing experience regardless of what decision they make.



Brianna with her birthmother Melissa, (r-l).

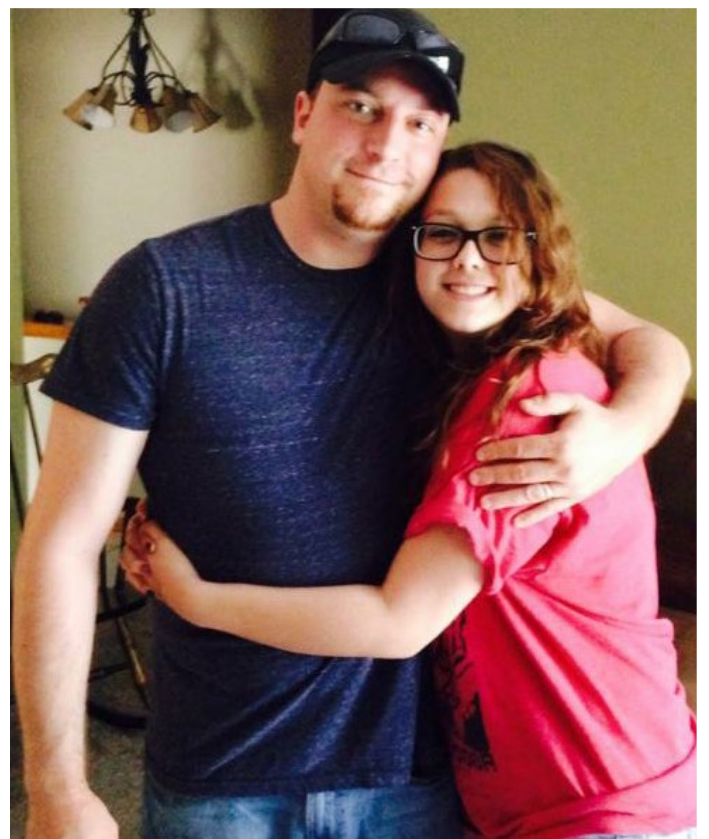
With Brianna, I can say yes I had a pregnancy, it was unintended, and I weighed all kinds of options and ultimately my choice was to place you in an adoption, and you have now lived that experience as an adoptee. We can also celebrate that it doesn't have to be everyone's choice, all choices are valid.

Shari: How has your relationship with the adoptive parents evolved over the years?

Melissa: Early on in the relationship, everything centered around the children. Over the years as Brianna got older, and as her brother got older, there's been times when we visit where the children might not even be there. We came to enjoy one another above and beyond

the children and we shared a genuine interest in what was going on in one another's lives.

Shari: Given the experience that you've had, what would you want to tell people about open adoption?



Brianna with her birthfather Steve.

Melissa: Open adoption can be used interchangeably with so many different types of adoption that I don't believe are genuinely open.

It needs to be entered with this fundamental belief that we all are valuable in this relationship. As soon as you start taking away any pieces of that value system—it becomes a game of Jenga, and the whole thing would just fall apart.

I can say what adoption is not: saving a child from bad parents and being rescued by good parents. That sets everyone up for failure—even if it's called open. It's implied that there's the good guy and the bad guy, and the child is just a pawn in that game, and that's not in the best interest of a child.

A true open adoption is based on the idea of a family—whatever that family may look like -- coming together from a place of intention and making a choice together that is not influenced by ulterior motives or other people's assumptions.

My experience of open adoption is that it is something much greater than just adoption and just the creation of a family, it is really a way of living and a way of going through life in terms of the value system we create.

It needs to start with the mindset of I'm going to enter into this experience of creating and expanding my family beyond the child—by welcoming these other people into my world. We'll all have a really special place in this family.

We're going to set into this big huge adventure together and we will come out of that with a well-balanced child that is loved, comes into a place of their own identity and hopefully can get a little something from everyone.

Shari: Where is everyone now?

Melissa: Brianna lives and goes to college in Philadelphia. Greg and Jan live in Northern Virginia. Brianna's biological father lives in Kansas. My partner Jason and I live in Portland with our three

children. I have a step-son who is 13 and two young daughters who are 5 and 6 1/2 that are Brianna's half-siblings. I work as a Registered Nurse.



The power of choice surfaced throughout Garrett and Melissa's stories and affected the lives of all of the participants in deeply meaningful ways. What is this illusive act called "choice"? Choice has been politicized, but it is simply "the act of selecting or making a decision when faced with multiple possibilities". It is a fundamental right and immensely important to the human condition. Choice gives us agency over our lives and affirms that our thoughts and beliefs matter. The

element of choice is especially essential in adoption, since it is such a life-altering experience.

Garrett, at the young age of 19, recognized that his choices were different from the birthmother's. She could choose between parenting, abortion and adoption. But for him there were only two forks in the road; to be involved, or not to be involved. By being involved he could have a voice in the pregnancy decision, but the ultimate choice was in the birthmom's hands. It also

It really helps when everyone is open to the idea that we all have a special and unique place in this child's life.

- Birthmother Melissa



Melissa (center) with her family: Stepson Tucker, partner Jason, their daughters Bonnie Ray and Mabel Jay and birthdaughter Brianna, (l-r).

An Open Adoption Timeline: MELISSA & BRIANNA.

1997

Our first meeting. Little did I know about what an incredible journey would follow.

Our first visit after Brianna was born. It was a magical holiday week.

A family reunion visit, and Brianna's first birthday celebration.

We really started seeing more of Brianna's resemblance to me around this time.

Celebrating Steve's marriage. Brianna was a very honored flower girl. I was going through a tough personal time and was so grateful for our irreplaceable relationships.

A recent summer visit with much needed breaks for us both.

Women's March in D.C.! What a pivotal moment for both of us. I value this experience so much. It was priceless to share it with Brianna and some of her closest friends.

2018



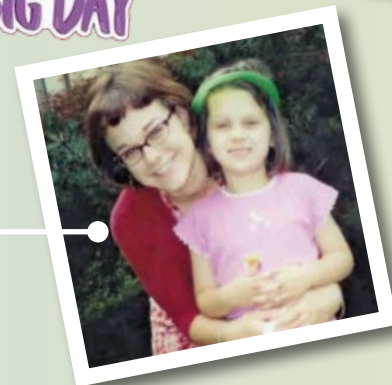
family TIME



BIG DAY



Smile



ENJOY THE LITTLE THINGS



RELAX



occurred to him that by being involved, he would give his son, Fin, a choice: to have a relationship with him or not.

Acknowledging everyone's right in adoption to make choices requires letting go of control over the outcome. But I suppose if you live long enough you come to the realization that you never had control over the outcome to begin with, especially if it involves the actions of other people. There is something fundamentally empowering about being trusted to make a choice. Garrett had faith that the birthmom, Fin and the adoptive parents would make the best, most thoughtful choices they could.

The thread of choice and intentionality was reflected in every part of their open adoption. Knowing that his choice to be involved was a conscious decision, helped Garrett move through the grief process. Knowing that his parents were hand-selected by his birthparents, allowed Fin to feel he had been genuinely entrusted by his birthparents into the care of his parents. As Fin grew into adulthood, he chose to deepen the relationships within his birth family by teaching drumming lessons to Garrett's children and going to Disneyland with Garrett's family.

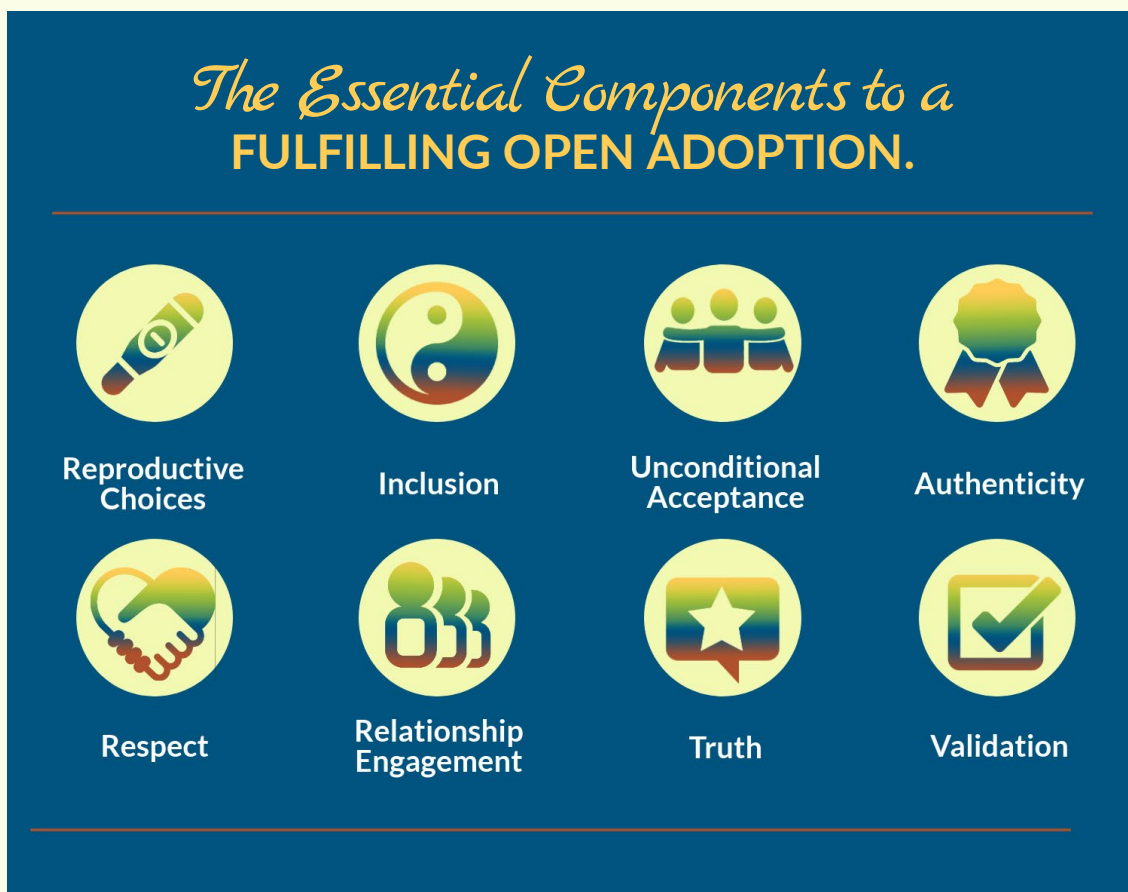
Melissa explored her options thoroughly during her pregnancy. This experience led her to form a strong value around the importance of people having control over their reproductive choices, free from the influence of others. She believes that when

a pregnancy option is framed as the "right choice" it's dismissive of the individual's experience and the fact that none of the choices are easy. Her contention is there isn't a type of woman who chooses to parent, or to terminate the pregnancy, or to plan an adoption. They are all valid choices, and there are women who have made all three choices for different reasons and at different times in their life.

The other essential components to a fulfilling open adoption that were woven into Melissa and Garrett's experiences were inclusion, unconditional acceptance, authenticity, relationship engagement, respect, trust and validation. Validation, in particular seemed to be

a catalyst for the other components. Knowing that she was deeply valued by the adoptive parents inspired Melissa to fully entrust Brianna into the adoptive parent's care. When the adoptive dad shared with Garrett how much Fin cherished their time together, Garrett felt a deep sense of value and worth.

So what makes an open adoption work for all of the players? It starts with the adoptive parents coming to terms with their own losses so they can create an exclusive place for the birthparents. As Melissa says, "Children can get so much value from so many different people and different experiences in life. Adoptive families can have so much to offer, but that doesn't have to replace something else. Open adoption needs to be entered with this fundamental belief that we all are valuable in this relationship."



Once the birthparents see they are genuinely welcomed, respected and accepted, they can plant the seeds of trust. Over the years, this trust blossoms and a family is formed that surrounds the child with love and honors every person's place in their life.

Every open adoption looks different, just like every extended family looks different. When we are guided by the tenets of compassion, trust and validation, we will create something that's uniquely ours. The legacy of these treasured ingredients will inform the child's choices as they grow and carry these relationships into the next generation. ■