

A Better Way Forward: Open Adoption and its Benefits for Adopted Children and Their Adoptive and Biological Parents

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Despite the beliefs of many people to the contrary, adopted children who are placed into an open adoption where contact with their biological families is maintained have a far better chance of thriving and enjoying continued mental health than those whose contacts with their birth families are cut off. Open adoption leads to more positive outcomes for adopted children than closed adoption, as it results in better overall adjustment, attachment, and identity development; ready access to historical and medical information; and greater feelings of security and well-being for adopted children and their adoptive and biological parents. In this paper, the advantages of open adoption will be demonstrated by a careful analysis of scholarly material and other evidence, in order to illustrate that, generally, open adoption is in children's best interests.

The implications of openness in adoption remain a subject of great debate, and in fact are among the most controversial issues in the adoption arena (Mail & March, 2005a). Although most people think of open adoption as a new phenomenon, in actuality it was common practice in North American adoptions until the 1930s (Siegel & Smith, 2012). The intent of moving to absolute confidentiality in adoption at this time was to shield unmarried mothers and adopted children from the "stigma of illegitimacy" (Ge et al., 2008, p. 529) and to protect the privacy of all parties involved in hopes of affecting a clean break from the past.

Openness in adoption refers to "the level of contact taking place between adoptive and birth family members" (Von Korff, Grotevant, & McRoy, 2006, p. 531). While there is no communication at all in confidential (closed) adoptions, the level of openness in open adoption arrangements can vary dramatically, ranging from an occasional exchange of letters or photographs mediated through a third party (such as an adoption agency) to regular ongoing personal visits among the adoptive and birth families and the adopted child (Von Korff et al., 2006).

Having no bridge to their past left many adoptees wrestling with issues around who they were and where they belonged in the world (Jones, 2004).

In the decades immediately following the advent of closed adoption, it was not unusual for children to grow up unaware of their adopted status, or for births to be registered in such a way that the names of the adoptive parents were substituted for the birth parents' names (Brodzinsky, 2005). Many adoptees from this era have since come forward, "voicing their displeasure that essential parts of their history were kept secret, including the basic medical and social histories of their birth parents" (Lifton, 1979, as cited in Jones, 2004, p. 4).

Having no bridge to their past left many adoptees wrestling with issues around who they were and where they belonged in the world (Jones, 2004). Adoption was "shrouded in shame and secrecy," but is now "metamorphosing into a radically new process ... helping us redefine our understanding of family," says American adoption researcher Susan Wolfgram (2008, p. 133).

Since the 1970s, there has been a movement towards greater openness and flexibility in societal practices around parenting, with the result that open adoption has made enormous inroads and – in one form or another – is now considered to be standard adoption practice by many adoption agencies (Wolfgram, 2008).

Society's increasingly accepting attitudes towards issues such as single parenthood and abortion accelerated the shift to open adoption; as healthy white infants became less and less available, birth parents (mainly mothers) felt empowered to begin to exercise more authority with adoption practitioners, insisting on remaining involved in their children's lives (Wolfgram, 2008). Prospective adoptive couples "were faced with a choice of traditional closed adoption and waiting for a number of years, or opting for contact with the birth family and most likely receiving their infant within a year; many chose the latter," explains Wolfgram (2008, p. 134). No matter how open the adoption, of course, it is the adoptive parents who are the child's legal guardians (Jones, 2004).

Here in Ontario, there are some relatively new regulations and recommendations in effect that allow for a variety of openness arrangements – in fact, adoption openness can now be court ordered if it is felt to be in a child’s best interests (Plunkett, 2010). As in other jurisdictions, in Ontario this legislation is underpinned by attachment research, which has revealed that openness in adoption tends to promote attachment security (Plunkett, 2010). It is now well known, for instance, that after too much loss, children may lose the capacity to form close relationships, and that their early bonds to significant caregivers – usually parents, but in effect anyone with whom the child has extremely close ties – must therefore be treated with great sensitivity, and if at all possible, preserved in order for children to attach securely in other relationships (Plunkett, 2010). “When applying these research results to adoption practice, it should be recognized that a well thought out openness arrangement can promote an adopted child’s capacity to form and maintain attachments with their adoptive family,” states Ontario Association of Children’s Aid Societies (OACAS) writer/advocate Ross Plunkett (2010, p. 2). “Openness agreements have a demonstrated track record of being beneficial to an adopted child’s long term outcomes,” Plunkett (2010, p. 4) confirms.

As social practice becomes increasingly holistic, there is an abundance of research available that challenges the basic principles of confidential adoption and points to open adoption as a superior and more compassionate and open-minded option (Brodzinsky, 2005; Siegel & Smith, 2012; Wolfgram, 2008). Research has shown that open adoption can have many other benefits for adoptees besides those revolving around attachment security; these include promoting positive identity formation, self-esteem, and better overall psychological adjustment than closed adoptions, with the result that an extensive range of intrapersonal, interpersonal and developmental processes are positively impacted, notes American researcher David Brodzinsky (2005).

Open adoption “will reduce the child’s sense of rejection and loss by fostering a more empathetic understanding of the circumstances surrounding relinquishment, which in turn should support more positive self-esteem and fewer adjustment difficulties,” states Brodzinsky (2005, p. 147). It appears that children in open

arrangements, having birth relatives in their lives, tend to realize that they were not unloved or abandoned, and this helps minimize or neutralize feelings of rejection, allowing the adoptee to develop a better sense of self (Jones, 2004). For example, researchers describe one commonly-expressed sentiment among adopted children who are in contact with their birth mothers as being, “I know now that she didn’t give me up because of anything I did wrong, but because she cared” (Brodzinsky, 2005, p. 150). In addition, the often traumatic need to search and reunite with birth relatives is no longer necessary (Jones, 2004) – a benefit of open adoption frequently overlooked by researchers.

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Identity formation is a key aspect of development that becomes increasingly important as children reach adolescence, and this is especially true of those who are adopted, as they may struggle more than adolescents in the general population with identity issues (Grotevant, Perry, & McRoy, 2005). It is important that if at all possible adoptees are given opportunities to determine “how they are alike and different from both the biological and adoptive families,” states Plunkett (2010, p. 3). Research shows that openness helps in this area, as well as in adoption stability, by providing adoptees with “accurate information about their birth parents, which allows them, amongst other things, to understand and assess the reasons why their birth parents were unable to parent them” (Plunkett, 2010, p. 3). Being better informed and more equipped to answer their child’s questions about birth relatives, adoptive parents are then able to do a better job of helping their adopted child assimilate his/her history into a healthy identity, notes Plunkett (2010).

Establishment of adoptee identity is

also aided in open adoption by “first-hand knowledge of biological, medical, and genetic history” (Jones, 2004, p. 13). As medicine advances, such information is vastly increasing in importance and relevance, point out Canadian adoption researchers Charlene Miall and Karen March (2005a). They executed a relatively large, Canada-wide, random-sample telephone survey (with 706 telephone respondents and 82 qualitative in-home interviews) examining public support for evolving adoption practices. Their subjects were largely white, middle class, well educated (52 per cent had a post-secondary education) and over the age of 30. Miall and March (2005a) explained that any generalization of their results would need to factor in the specificity of this demographic, but added that it is, in fact, typical of volunteer samples and “shares characteristics with the traditional adoptive parent profile,” and as such is a fair representation of “the community stakeholders in adoption” (p. 386).

The Miall/March (2005a) survey revealed access to updated health, medical, and genetic information to be the most frequently cited benefit of open adoption. Adoptees with contact to birth relatives have ongoing access to this information, as well as to information about their adoption, birth relatives, and family histories. In contrast, adoptees in closed arrangements are usually in the medically-precarious situation of having to make do with outdated information that has been “frozen in time” since placement (Grotevant et al., 2008, p. 89).

By virtually all expert accounts, the problems “created by denying adoptees information about their biological histories are abundant” (Jones, 2004, p. 11). It seems clear from the research that in open adoptions, adoptees are not only better able to manage their feelings of loss, they also tend to remain more in touch with their biological, cultural, and racial roots (Jones, 2004). It also appears they may exhibit fewer behavioural issues than adoptees in closed arrangements (Von Korff et al., 2006). It is widely believed that adoptees in open arrangements will be confused by the differing value systems of their birth and adoptive families, and that this may lead to them exhibiting more behavioural and emotional issues than adoptees in closed arrangements (Jones, 2004; Miall & March, 2005b). Recent studies indicate that, in fact, the reverse seems to be more

accurate, as it is adopted adolescents in closed arrangements who actually self-report more aggression, defiance and other “externalizing behaviours” (Von Korff et al., 2006, p. 534), with a greater proportion of adoptees in closed adoptions scoring in the clinical range. These behavioural issues are confirmed by the adolescents’ adoptive parents as well (Von Korff et al., 2006). Thus, adoptive parents in open adoption arrangements may find themselves facing less challenging behaviours from their child. There is also strong evidence that – contrary to popular belief – adoptive parents benefit from openness in many other ways as well.

Opponents of open adoption argue that the birth and adoptive families may wind up in a mutually unsatisfying and unsustainable relationship (Jones, 2004). There are also concerns that ongoing contact between the two families will result in “greater insecurity in the adoptive parents and undermine their sense of control and entitlement to their child,” states Brodzinsky (2005, p. 152). However research has shown that maintaining contact with their child’s biological family can help adoptive parents to view the birth relatives and the adopted child more empathetically and realistically, thus reducing the adoptive parents’ anxieties, insecurities, and fears of the unknown – including worry that the birth family will want the child back or that having both families in his/her life will make it difficult for the child to bond to the adoptive family (Brodzinsky, 2005; Jones, 2004). This helps to promote security and bonding within the adoptive family, and strengthens the adoptive parents’ feelings of entitlement as legitimate parents to their adopted child (Brodzinsky, 2005; Plunkett, 2010). In turn, this can lead to better communication and rapport between the child and the adoptive parents, “not only affecting the adjustment of the adopted child but also influencing feelings of closeness to the adopted parents as well as feelings of satisfaction with the adoption, even into adulthood,” Brodzinsky states (2005, p. 153). There has to be a balance initially though, “between preserving significant attachments and ensuring enough time between visits to allow the child to develop their attachment to the adoptive family,” cautions Plunkett (2010, p. 12).

Although it is common for adoptive parents to enter into openness arrangements with concerns about issues such as potential conflicts with their child’s birth family or

over-involvement of birth relatives in the child’s life, there is a great deal of evidence that once the openness arrangement is in place, the majority of adoptive parents are satisfied with it and say they actually would be happy to have more contact with their child’s birth relatives (Grotevant et al., 2008). Many adoptive parents come to view open adoption as more compassionate than closed adoption, and make statements along the lines of there now being “more family to love their children” (Jones, 2004, p. 13). Thus, it appears that perceptions that the birth relatives will be camping out on the adoptive family’s doorstep tend to be more fiction than fact. Boundaries between the two families must be negotiated – open adoption can be a dance (Brodzinsky, 2005) – but studies to date suggest that birth relatives in these situations tend to accept their role and the adoptive family’s parental authority (Jones, 2004). A number of studies have also indicated that the adoptive parents who opt for open adoption arrangements tend to be those who have a more secure parenting style than the adoptive families who prefer closed arrangements (Brodzinsky, 2005; Grotevant et al., 2005).

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Concerns that open adoption may cause adopted children to have conflicting loyalties between their birth and adoptive parents is another commonly perceived potential issue with open adoption (Jones, 2004; Miall and March, 2005b). Although there is no denying that adoptees in both open and closed arrangements may feel conflicting loyalties to their biological and adoptive families, recent research seems to indicate that these effects are lessened or eliminated in open adoption arrangements due to their more open and inclusive dynamic (Siegel & Smith, 2012). In the well-known Minnesota-Texas Adoption Research Project (MTARP), adolescents who were in contact with their birth mothers made it clear that they “could want a deeper relationship with birth mothers while also being content with their adoptive families; they did not feel they were having to choose one family over another,” explain

the MTARP researchers (Grotevant et al., 2005, p. 174).

The MTRAP findings also revealed that adolescents in open arrangements considered the main advantages they obtained from ongoing contact with their birth mothers to be the provision of additional supports; the opportunity to better understand themselves and their backgrounds; and the opportunity to meet other birth relatives (Grotevant et al., 2005).

To date, many of the studies on open adoption have focused on information provided by the adults in these arrangements (Grotevant et al., 2005), but research centering on interviews with adoptees themselves is accumulating, the ongoing MTARP findings being a prominent example. An important American longitudinal project focusing on interviews on post-adoption contact and its consequences, MTARP has followed hundreds of adoptees and their families in a wide spectrum of arrangements from confidential/closed to open/fully disclosed, from the time the adopted children were infants right through to adolescence (Grotevant et al., 2008). The results point strongly to the benefits of open adoption over closed – adolescents and their family networks in fully open adoptions reported the highest levels of satisfaction with their arrangements, while those without contact reported the lowest (Grotevant et al., 2008). Moreover, according to the findings:

Adolescents having no contact were more likely to want contact to increase in future rather than stay the same. Many adolescents (55.2 per cent) already having contact wanted it to increase in the future. Fewer than 1 per (0.7 per cent) of the participants across the contact groups wanted to see the level of contact decrease. (Grotevant et al., 2008, p. 89)

In the initial waves, MTARP participants included 720 individuals – the mean age of the adopted adolescents was 15.7.

Another important American longitudinal study around adoption is the Early Growth and Development Study (EGDS). Aware that “previous studies have shown that the degree of openness is associated with satisfaction with the adoption process” (Ge et al., 2008, p. 533) and using this as their hypothesis, the EGDS researchers collected data on open adoption satisfaction among adoptees and their birth and adoptive families and “examined descriptive statistics



of the study variables” (Ge et al., 2008, p. 534). They concluded that there is indeed a significant positive correlation “between openness in the adoption process and post-placement adjustment,” not just for adoptees but for their adoptive and birth relatives as well (Ge et al., 2008 p. 536).

Nevertheless, where birth relatives are concerned, critics of open adoption express concerns that openness arrangements may complicate and prolong their grief process (Ge et al., 2008; Jones, 2004). However what research there is in this area (generally interviews with birth mothers) indicates that both the adoptive parents and the birth relatives tend to be empowered by the choices, flexibility, and open exchange of information implicit in open adoption, and are generally more satisfied and express greater well-being when the adoption process is open (Ge et al., 2008; Jones, 2004). Although profound feelings of loss attend both types of arrangement, it appears that birth mothers involved in open adoptions are usually “better able to accept their decision and resolve their grief,” according to Krista Jones (2004, p. 66), a Canadian researcher who devised a questionnaire for birth mothers which indicates that those involved in open adoptions tend to feel a greater sense of control around the relinquishment of their child, which aids in their grief resolution. Jones’ research sampling was small, involving only 15 birth mothers. However, she also executed an extensive summary of past research on how open and closed adoption impact birth mothers, and compared that information with her own qualitative and quantitative findings (Jones, 2004).

Using these methods Jones (2004) also came to the conclusion that open adoption appears to offer birth mothers greater peace of mind than closed adoption, as it fulfills a well-documented wish for continued contact with their child and knowledge of his/her circumstances and well-being. Contrary to public opinion in decades past, research indicates that the vast majority of birth mothers never stop caring about their adopted child, and those who enter into closed adoption arrangements continue to hold out the hope that one day they will reunite (Jones, 2004). The fact that it was birth mothers who lead the push for open adoption over 40 years ago makes a good case for it being a development that many of them embrace today.

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Of course, each adoption is unique and requires individual assessment regarding openness needs and levels (Brodzinsky, 2005). In child protection adoptions, notes Plunkett (2010, p. 12), meeting the “significant special needs” of the children involved may have to take “priority over other considerations, including openness.” This does not necessarily mean that contact with birth relatives is ruled out if there are serious protection issues to consider – for instance, when a child has been abused by biological relatives. Even in such cases, “contact may still be beneficial,” notes Plunkett (2010), “but it will need to be a safe experience for the child” (p. 1), so it may have to be indirect or at arm’s length. Hard as it may be for some people to understand, in protection cases or situations where the child has insecure attachments to his/her birth family, contact may still be preferable to “having to reconcile questions about identity and worth in the face of perceived abandonment,” Plunkett (2010, p. 6) explains. These are difficult decisions, and

practitioners are advised to avoid a one-size-fits-all approach to openness arrangements, he and other researchers advise (Grotevant et al., 2005; Miall & March, 2005b; Plunkett, 2010).

Two decades ago, lawyer Ruth Appell (2010) was having a challenging time implementing any sort of approach at all to openness arrangements. She was battling a system that still largely viewed adoption “as a rebirth that severs and erases all ties” (Appell, 2010, p. 16). She describes her years in the American court system, representing foster children and their families “whose legal ties had been or were on the precipice of being terminated” (Appell, 2010, p. 12). The children remained “deeply connected to their parents, even when they were resigned to never again live with them,” Appell recalls (2010, p. 12). She explains that she worked hard to negotiate (at the time unenforceable) open adoption agreements between birth and prospective adoptive parents, in hopes “that the process itself would communicate the vitality of these connections to the child welfare system and the families who would adopt our clients” (Appell, 2010, p. 13). When Appell’s peers asked why she bothered, she replied that “adoptees are happier when they have direct contact with their birth parents” (2010, p. 35). As this paper attests, research in the area of adoption does appear to bear this out.

Despite the abundance of positive research on open adoption and the legislation resulting from that research however, the field has a long way to go to catch up (Plunkett, 2010). Many experts attribute this to factors such as lack of training in the child welfare sector and the widespread aforementioned misconceptions and myths about open adoption and its supposed potential negative impact on the adjustment security of adoptees and their biological and adoptive families (Miall & March, 2005b; Plunkett 2010). Adoption practitioners should be aware that their preconceptions about open adoption may not represent the best interests of the children in their care (Miall & March, 2005b).

The existing openness legislation is complicated and difficult to understand – another major deterrent to the expansion of openness practices, according to the website for the Ontario Ministry of Children and Youth Services (2010). “Openness and how it can be implemented is not yet widely

understood” by many adoption workers and adoptive families, writes the ministry on its website (2010, p. 54). Along with concerns about child safety and potential infringement on adoptive parental rights, this makes some children’s aid societies and adoptive families “reluctant to consider openness arrangements” according to the website (2010, p. 54). In fact, the site continues, many children’s aid societies “find the current legislation and tools – including openness orders and agreements – so complicated that they have established a policy not to use them” (p. 54). This indicates a lag between current adoption practices and changing social values, many proponents of open adoption insist, pointing to the widespread and long-standing promotion of open adoption within the private adoption sector; the increasing acceptance of open adoption by the general public and public adoption practitioners; and the fact that adoption legislation in Ontario and many other parts of North America now supports open adoption – both in terms of unsealing past adoption records and promoting adoption openness in future (Miall & March, 2005b; Ontario Ministry of Children and Youth Services, 2010).

“Ironically, the current adoption system in Ontario is not family friendly,” states the ministry website (2010, p. 35). Measures that the government and children’s aid societies can implement to help change this in terms of open adoption include increased supports and education for adoption workers, adoptees, and adoptive and biological parents, and clear direction regarding methods of problem resolution (Plunkett, 2010; Ontario Ministry of Children and Youth Services, 2010). As Miall and March (2005b) state, “Practitioners should attend to the cultural lag their policies and practices may represent, to the detriment of the children in their care” (p. 92).

Advocates of open adoption everywhere would no doubt concur. “Greater education and training, along with ongoing research into how different kinds of open adoption journeys affect their participants, can help to guide and improve policy, practice – and lives,” says Adam Perlman (2012, Conclusion section, para. 2), executive director of the Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute, an American organization that recently released results it had obtained from a comprehensive survey incorporating findings on open adoption from 100

adoption programs in the United States (Siegel & Smith, 2012).

“Research and practice illuminate the wide variety of ways in which open adoption can succeed, and underscore that it can benefit everyone involved,” Perlman continues (2012, Conclusion section, para. 1). Perlman concludes:

Putting an end to secrecy in adoption does not erase the grief or loss embedded in the experience; it does, however, empower participants by providing them with information and access so that they can face and deal with facts instead of fantasies. (2012, Conclusion section, para. 2)

Research has revealed that when adoptions are more open, adoption satisfaction is higher for adoptive and biological parents as well.

The evidence that open adoption has preferred outcomes not just for adoptees, but also for their adoptive and birth families, is undeniably abundant. Study after study has confirmed that maintaining some form of contact with their biological family not only helps keep adopted children in touch with their medical and family histories, but also has a positive impact on their wellbeing and on such important aspects of their development such as attachment security and identity formation. Research has revealed that when adoptions are more open, adoption satisfaction is higher for adoptive and biological parents as well.

For many years adoption policy makers and practitioners have been promoting the importance of child permanency outcomes and maintaining family connections (Wolfgram, 2008). Open adoption speaks to both, and has the advantage of being a strength-based practice that points the way forward to a future that embraces our culturally evolving concepts of family. As various adoption researchers have suggested, a perceptual shift towards more openness in adoption is essential, as the time has come for adoptive families to be viewed less as a self-contained entity that has added a child, and more like an “adoptive kinship network” in which the adopted child “permanently connects families of birth and rearing” (Grotevant et al., 2008, p. 91).

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