



Open Adoption

Four Elements to a Peaceful Journey

By Megan Montgomery, LMSW and Rachael Metz, LCSW

Open can mean many things. Think of it like a door — one person says, “the door is open,” what they mean is that the door is unlocked; another person says those same words, “the door is open” and they mean the door is ajar; a third person says, “the door is open” and they mean that there is wide space that allows access and view inside the room behind the door.

In adoption, there has been a shift toward increasingly open relationships between birth and adoptive families. Similar to a door being open, this openness can look different depending on who is involved and their regard for openness.

The concept of openness in adoption has often been associated with private and kinship adoption, however openness can exist in all types of adoption relationships. In fact, the adoption does not need to be considered an open adoption in order for openness

within the adoption to exist. Whether all members of the triad participate in some degree of openness or not, by the adoptive family acknowledging there was a first family and keeping that history a part of their child’s life, they are fostering openness within their adoption.

In foster families for example, there is openness with the biological parents of the child they are fostering since they are often facilitating visits between the child and biological parents. Comparatively, in international adoption a child may have had foster parents who cared for them in their birth country prior to their adoption abroad. In some cases the adoptive family may be able to gather information on the foster family who cared for their child and they may keep in touch — creating openness that will connect them to their child’s caregiver and maintain a connection for their child to their life before adoption.

In adoptions where there is no information about birth family we become cognizant that even when all members of the adoption triad cannot be physically present in the relationship, there can still be openness through acknowledging the grief associated with the loss of one’s first family, conversations validating and normalizing a child’s adoption story and also through support of search and reunion.

In her book, “The Open Hearted Way to Open Adoption,” author Lori Holden writes, “Open adoption isn’t just something parents do.” Her statement reveals what we are already thinking about open adoption — open adoption relationships require work, effort, commitment, intention, support and more.

Subsequently, this transition to greater openness presents new challenges for adoption triad members.

This openness becomes a lifestyle, sometimes a difficult one, but a worthwhile one. Knowing how to initiate and handle varying circumstances that may present themselves in open adoption can increase the success and overall happiness within the relationship.

Four essential elements that will foster a more peaceful post-adoption journey for adoptive parents (and truly all triad members) include:

1. Commitment. The mantra of this element is “suspend judgment and stay focused on the end goal.” If we can let go of any predisposed notions about what this relationship “should” look like; if we can remind ourselves why we want this open relationship — it will help us to remain committed to making this open relationship a priority. This includes not judging the circumstances that surround our child’s adoption story. It is working to respect all members of the triad, even through difficult times. The commitment that parents show to valuing the history and future of this relationship reflects back onto their child and can fill them with comfort and confidence in their adoption story.

2. Awareness of who your supports are and where your resources are.

This begins with family, friends and the adoption agency. Assessing the relationships you have with others to determine who will be supportive of your open adoption relationship is critical. Learning from the onset of the adoption journey what local resources are available to you at each point of the journey will help to prepare for when you are ready to access those resources. These resources include but are not limited to, the agency and its social work, counseling and legal staff; early intervention; local physicians and hospitals; mentors; support groups; adoption education organizations; and schools. Helping your older child develop supports and resources of their own is also important. It can be empowering and useful to your child in helping them give voice to their story.

3. Healthy boundaries. Setting boundaries is a natural part of relationship building. Boundaries are not walls, but lines of distinction. Without these lines, roles can become confusing. It is also important to remember that boundaries can shift over time as relationships take shape. Evaluating boundaries can be useful and learning to communicate boundaries is important. There are occasions where it may not be safe to stay in contact and there may be occasions where it feels right to increase closeness. When the relationship with birth family is not a physical one, these boundaries are the ones we establish with our child through conversations about their birth family, culture and life before joining our family. The goal is to create a comfort with conversation surrounding the adopted child’s history, with the child’s best interest as the number one priority.

4. Keeping your child’s needs paramount.

Building these bridges through open relationships brings with it many benefits. When prospective adoptive parents choose openness in their adoption they are taking into account the need that their child will likely have to fill in the missing pieces of who they are and where they came from. There may also be times where the relationship that has been created doesn’t seem to be in the child’s best interest. There may come a time where you take pause to re-evaluate, to see how the relationship can be modified, so that your child’s needs are met as best as possible. As your child gets older, including them in these moments will help them to feel the intention behind the open relationship and give them some sense of control.

These four elements can lay a strong foundation for a peaceful post-adoption relationship. Navigating openness with sensitivity and cooperation, being mindful of the importance of working together (all triad members, supports and resources included) and the benefits this effort brings help to create this lifestyle. In a twist of the famous words of Ralph Waldo Emerson, what you should find is that “openness in adoption is a journey not a destination.”

Rachael Metz, LCSW has been an adoption social worker and family advocate at Adoption STAR since 2013. She provides support and guidance to prospective adoption parents along their journey to parenthood. Metz earned a master’s degree in social work from Case Western Mandel School of Applied Social Sciences. She became a licensed MSW in 2007 and a licensed CSW in 2016. Metz joined New Alternatives for Children in New York City in October 2007, first as a social worker and then as a clinical coordinator of the Post-Adoption Program. Metz’s years of experience in the adoption field, her gentle nature, and her strong clinical skills assist individuals and couples as they navigate the many paths and emotions involved in the adoption journey.

Megan Montgomery, LMSW, LICSW, has been the international adoption coordinator at Adoption STAR since 2012. She works with families who have chosen the international adoption path to parenthood from initial inquiry through the completion of their post-adoption reports. Montgomery earned a master’s degree in social work from the State University of New York at Buffalo. After a few years working with children with social emotional disorders and/or behavioral challenges and their families she moved into the international adoption field with an agency in Boston, Massachusetts, where she obtained her independent clinical license in social work. Montgomery’s experience in the international adoption field are valuable to families looking to consider international adoption as a pathway to growing their family as well as to families post-adoption seeking resources and support. Her volunteer work includes working to provide humanitarian aid to children living outside of family care and much more.

The full presentation, Open Adoption: Preparing for A Successful Journey was part of the 2016 North American Council on Adoptable Children conference in Nashville, Tennessee. NACAC is an adoptive parent founded organization committed to meeting the needs of waiting children and the families who adopt them. For more information on NACAC, visit <http://www.nacac.org>.