

A background graphic featuring several stylized human figures in various colors (orange, red, yellow, green, blue) arranged in a circle, holding hands. The figures are semi-transparent and overlap each other, creating a sense of unity and community.

Making Openness Work for Kids and Families

ADOPTION MATTERS ONLINE EDUCATION EVENT

PAT CONVERY, FORMER EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, ACO

Open Adoption Can...

- Minimize the child's loss of relationships
- Maintain and celebrate important connections with people in his or her life
- Allow child to resolve losses with truth

Openness



- Should be considered in every adoption
- Does not just mean direct visits
- Should support the integrity of the adoptive family
- Can evolve over time

***Should be in
the best interests of the child
ALWAYS!!**

Fear and Worries



Common Fears

- Problems between child and birth family may continue
- Reminds child of abandonment/trauma
- Confusion for child – who is my parent?
- Child will not be ‘yours’
- Limits bonding with new family
- Differences in values between families

What Do We Know?

- Openness does NOT interfere with adoptive parents' sense of entitlement or control
- Children NOT confused about who is the parent
- Birth parents are respectful of boundaries set
- Birth parents are still able to resolve grief and loss
- Birth parents are faring better than those in 'closed' adoptions
- Openness does NOT negatively impact adolescent identity issues

Foster to Adoption Openness

- Children accept move to adoption better, less loss
- Decrease in adolescent identity issues
- Able to accept changes in contact schedule over time
- Youth expressed a strong need to have a voice in the planning

Foster to Adoption Openness

- Sibling relationships are strong – even when sibling is pre-verbal at the time of placement
- Adult and child satisfaction with openness is related to their ‘buy-in’ pre-placement

Why is Openness Good for the Child?

- Gives freedom to ask questions
- Gives access to the person who has the answers
- Gives permission for the child to bond with adoptive family
- Gives a sense of biological connectedness

Why is it Good for the Birth Family?

- Gives peace of mind that child is cared for
- Helps them to process grief/loss
- Offers a sense of control in decision-making
- Alleviates feeling they have abandoned their child

Why is it Good for the Adoptive Family?

- Offers a sense of control
- Aids in laying fears about birth family aside
- Gives access to on-going information
- Gives emotional permission to be the parent

How to Prepare for Openness



There Are Many Openness Options

- Not just visits
- Consider ongoing contact on a continuum
- Not all contact is open and identifying



Pre-Adoption

Discussion/planning should occur with

- Child
- Child's significant relations
- Adoptive/kin
- Resource Parent
- Note: driven by social worker

Discussion with Child

- Needs to be age appropriate
- Consider child's special needs – ex, ADHD, FASD, medical issues etc.
- Child's wishes may be different than what is realistic – honesty is important
- Worker needs to present plan to child, don't set up adoptive family

Discussion with Family/Kin

- Important to hear support of adoptive placement in discussion
- Discuss hopes and fears
- Help to understand the adoptive family adjustment/attachment needs

Discussion with Family/Kin

- Help to make realistic requests that focus on child's needs for relationship
- Create lifebook
- Discuss ways to maintain contact

Discussion with Prospective Adoptive/Kin member

- Starts in PRIDE/Homestudy
- Openly discuss fears and challenges, address concerns
- Provide full history of child's needs and extended family relationships
- Ask about discussions had with birth relatives and child

Discussion with Prospective Adoptive/Kin member

- What is the current contact? Openness order?
- Discuss realistic options that fit with adoptive family lifestyle
- Can it be sustained after finalization?

Prepare

- Talk openly about your concerns with partner, family and social worker
- Learn as much as possible about family history and birth family's vision of openness, as well as CAS
- Meet birth family members first without the child – re-define everyone's expectations
- Talk with foster parent about experience with birth relatives, routine, and visits

Having the Meeting



Meeting to Create an Agreement

- Includes adoptive parents, birth family members and social worker
- Often more than one meeting
- Focus on child – build on common ground
- Get to know each other
- Review hopes for openness

Meeting to Create an Agreement

- Reinforce benefits for child
- Make a simple plan for first contacts
- Pay attention to details – time, location, etc.
- Create a positive non-judgmental atmosphere
- Take time to debrief after the first contacts - observe feelings and reactions - make next plans

Creating an Openness Agreement/Plan

- **Open Adoption Structure** – how the family plans the openness relationship
- **Adoption Communication** – how the family talks about adoption and openness relationship

Elements of an Agreement

- Use KISS principle
- Clear message of positive, child focused intent
- Clear detail of initial plan for contact including pre-placement
- Build in adult-to-adult time in initial stage, relationship is key

Elements of an Agreement

- Address logistics details as much as necessary
- Have layers, ability to pull back if necessary, establish intent to move forward
- Include a communication plan as well as some form of direct contact, on the continuum

Elements of an Agreement

- Communication should be adult-to-adult
- Establish a review time prior to adoption finalization, ie. including adoption worker
- Commitment to address concerns

Where
do we go from
Here?



Moving Forward

- Start slow
- Use adoption worker during probation to support process
- Act on warning signs of trouble, pull back if necessary and discuss

Moving Forward

- Openness changes over time
- Relationship should be within the adoptive family context
- Routine is helpful for child - predictable
- Be prepared to meet with family to discuss issues of concern
- Expect child to have some confusing reactions

Some Useful Tips...

- Don't rush to expand
- Step by step approach based on welfare of child
- Expect additional requests, especially when things are going well
- Take time and space to review and plan

Some Useful Tips...

- Always focus on child's need for stability in family as well as having comfortable relationship with relatives
- As family grows, include all siblings
- Always be sensitive to child's loyalty and underlying need to know birth family - don't judge

Some Useful Tips...

- What's important to remember moving forward
- You have an agreement, but it can be flexible
- If you need help, ask for it – worker, ACO
- All relationships change, this one will to

Useful Websites

- <http://adoptontario.ca/openness>
- <https://www.adoption.on.ca/openness-resources>

Resources

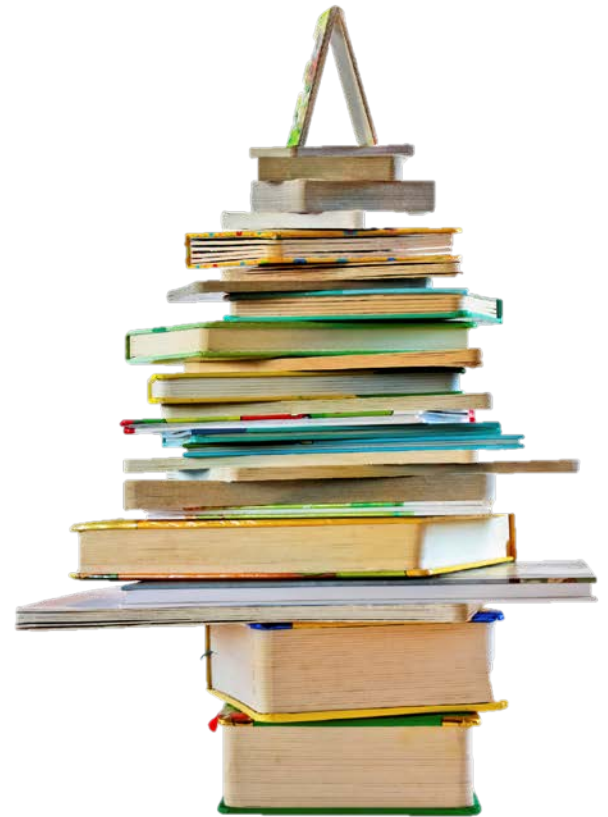


Useful Websites

- <http://www.openadoption.org/>
- http://www.cwla.org/programs/adoption/cwla_standards.htm
- http://www.childwelfare.gov/systemwide/laws_policies/statutes/cooperative.cfm
- <http://www.adoptioninstitute.org/policy/polopen1.html>
- <http://www.openadoptioninsight.org/>
- http://fsos.cehd.umn.edu/projects/mtarp/About_Us.html

Good Books

- Spirit of Open Adoption
- The Open Adoption Experience
- Children of Open Adoption
- What is Open Adoption



#Myadoptionis

Adoption marries past and present. Care and respect for both are needed for a happy, healthy relationship. – Kim, ACO PASS Clinician



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