Focus on the Child: Openness in Adoption from Foster Care
A guide for assessment and planning

The deeper the roots, the higher the reach
Open Adoption helps a child to reach their fullest potential with support and commitment of birth and adoptive families

When a child is in foster care, the first goal is always to return the child to the birth family. While in foster care, a primary focus is to maintain and build relationships with birth family members. Children often enjoy a regular schedule of visits with birth parents, siblings and sometimes extended family members. Visits are supervised if necessary and therapeutic supports are provided when needed. All of this support is positive for the child who develops a sense of family and builds relationships with birth family members while in foster care.

When a child is not able to return to birth parents, we must give the child a new family to belong to – forever. We call this adoption. Adoption, in all its forms (including kinship and Customary Care) gives a child that family to grow up and grow old in when birth parents are not able to.

Adoption provides the lifelong support that we ALL of us need to reach our greatest potential throughout our lives. However, for the child, the connections to birth family do not end when a new family is found.

Adoption creates a split between a person’s biology and biography. Openness is an effective way to help heal that split. – Lori Holden, adoptive parent and author.

Another analogy fits with a proverbial ‘family tree’ that often appears in our children’s school lessons as an exercise. We talk to children’s about ‘roots’ – to culture, history, heritage – and for an adopted child, to their birth family.

Open adoption is about nurturing and fertilizing the roots that a child has to their birth family, their culture, their past. When children are adopted they risk losing some if not all of these connections.

If we listen to nature’s lesson, strong roots will help our children grow upward and reach their fullest success and potential. It makes sense when you think about it; the roots need as much care and attention as the rest of the tree for maximum health and prosperous future. Now our challenge is to make it work for all members of the adoptive families – children and all parents.

Openness in adoption can be intimidating. It can be confusing for children at times. It is a journey of emotions and often challenges. However, when we understand the benefit for the adopted child, the work involved will be worth the gains for everyone.

Is Openness different when the child is being adopted from foster care?

For children who are placed in adoptive homes at birth, voluntarily by their birth families, openness in adoption has long been an accepted practice. With the support of a birth parent counsellor and an adoption worker, the birth and adoptive family meet prior to the birth of a child to discuss the birth family’s wishes for ongoing openness. In many cases, the birth parents and adoptive parents write a covenant or agreement to guide their ongoing relationship. Birth and adoptive parents, as well as adoptees, report positive benefits for all.
The question we have to ask is – *Should a child who is adopted from foster care not have the opportunity to maintain connections with birth family members after they are adopted?* Why should their life after adoption be different than peers who were adopted privately, at birth. Their birth parents’ inadequacies, whatever they may be, does not mean the child should be severed from all their connections.

Adoptive families may be nervous about agreeing to ongoing contact with birth family members. They learn about the importance of maintaining positive connections a child has in his or her life prior to placement while attending parent education training and having their adoption home study completed. With support they can understand the benefits of openness for their child, if done in a safe and thoughtful manner, with the needs of the child or youth at the forefront of ongoing contact. However, adoptive families need the right tools, information and ongoing support to navigate the journey of complex relationships that openness brings to their life.

Children and youth have clear views on connections that are important to them, especially as they get older. At the same time children benefit from the lifelong connection, support and relationships that an adoptive family brings to the uncertainty of life in the child welfare system and the perils of independent living at age 18.

*The challenge is to create openness relationships that can be sustained over time, as two separate families evolve and develop over the lifetime journey that is adoption.*

Some thoughts to consider:

- When a child has been in foster care prior to adoption, there may be tensions between the CAS and the birth family that make it more difficult to talk out plans and discuss concerns that either family may have related to agreements.

- Systemic issues within the child welfare system often create a large gap between the social workers who have worked directly with the family and the adoption workers who know the adoptive family best.

- Court orders that speak of openness are interpreted differently by various people within the birth and adoptive families as well as the child welfare system. Court orders may be made without input from the adoptive family and leading to directions that are not manageable by the family.

- A child’s need for openness may differ dramatically from the wants of birth family members and the comfort level of adoptive families.

- The history of family dynamics in birth families and the complexities of relationships that have developed while a child is in foster care.

- The two families have differing values that may conflict throughout the child’s lifetime.

- Openness evolves; it does not just begin.
These are factors that make it difficult to predict a long term plan for a child and the adoptive family. There are inherent challenges in bringing together two different families and a child who has been living apart from both families. There are risks of power imbalance and potential conflicts.

At the same time, experience in the field of private adoption has clearly shown successful outcomes when the focus is solely on supporting adoptive families and birth families in meeting and creating their own openness plans.

*With a clear focus on the child’s needs, it seems that birth and adoptive families can be empowered to make the long term commitment to openness.*

In 1997, James Gitterman gave guidelines for open adoption that are relevant to consider. In his book, *The Spirit of Open Adoption*, he talks about the relationship elements of ongoing contact and suggest every open adoption plan should build on the following principles.

*Every open adoption plan must:*

- *Honour the adoptee*
- *Be based on candour*
- *Be based on choices*
- *Honour the pain*
- *Be covenantal (be part of an agreement or pact made between families)*
- *Transform (evolve and be ever changing)*
- *Be adaptable*
- *Build community*

Taking a few minutes to think through these points in relation to what steps, activities or routines might be helpful in the creation of the openness plan is a good way to move forward with planning.

More recently, Lori Holden, an adoptive mother, provided us with another helpful framework to consider in education and planning for openness. Lori explains that contact and openness are NOT the same thing. In fact, when considering openness of children from the foster care system where issues of risk may be a concern, the simple concept of contact may not even be a consideration that can be entertained. And yet we know that youth today can easily make connections with birth family through social media. When done without guidance and support, the child may be put at risk of physical and emotional harm contrary to the efforts of a child welfare system that seeks to protect children and support adoptive families.
In her book, The Open-Hearted Way to Open Adoption: Helping Your Child Grow Up Whole, Lori presents the **Open Adoption Grid**: 

1) **Low Contact & Low Openness** is what we would call a closed adoption. Not only is there very little contact or identifying information available to the child, but the adoptive parents are ill-equipped to deal with adoption openly. They may not be comfortable having tough conversations and confronting difficult feelings about adoption, as the child grows and advances cognitively. Challenges may be profound as a child enters adolescence, struggles with identity and questions about birth family. Even in a closed adoption, youth have 'ready access' to birth family through social media. Youth and older children who were adopted from foster care have memories of birth family to guide them on their search.

2) **High Contact and Low Openness** is where there *is* contact with birth family, maybe through exchanges of photos, emails or even meetings. Parents here may say things like, "We follow our open adoption agreement exactly' But what's lacking is what Jim Gritter calls the *Spirit of Open Adoption*. These families may not encourage talk about the birth family unless the child initiates and subtly avoid situations that bring birth family memories or even general talk about adoption to the table. Because of the lack of openness here, the child is still at a disadvantage, feeling split between her clan of biology and her clan of biography.
3) **High Contact and High Openness** is where the birth family is considered extended family, both in contact and in openness. This relationship may be no different than one with a beloved uncle, sister-in-law or grandmother (or even a relative not so beloved!). The relationships are child-centered and inclusive. The child is claimed by and able to claim both clans, helping her integrate all her pieces as she grows through toddler, school years, teens and into adulthood.

4) **Low Contact and High Openness** is at play in many foster and international adoptions, as well as some domestic infant adoptions where distance or birth family availability is a factor. It involves low contact but high openness.

Logistics and safety issues, such as mental health or addiction issues, may make actual contact not possible or unwise, but the parents still parent with openness. They are able to deal with their own emotions about their family-building story mindfully, and they are able to open their hearts to their child as she processes her adoption story and integrates her identity. Talk about birth family, lifestory and adoption are initiated by the parents and the child learns to feel comfortable in asking questions and exploring feelings about their life and family connections.

*Education is key to success in improving our ability to help birth and adoptive families create openness plans that will last a lifetime. Adoptive families, birth families and professionals working in adoption and permanency planning must all be educated about the theory and practice of openness planning.*
Checklist for Assessing and Preparing for Openness in Child Welfare Adoption Planning

The following is a checklist to guide assessment and planning for Openness in adoption for children being placed from the child welfare system.

The list may be used as a guide for discussion, preparation and planning to ensure that materials presented to the court and in case planning conferences represents a thorough and comprehensive overview of all the key factors relevant to making the best decisions for children and youth.

This list is meant to address and help understand the clinical considerations including:

- whether openness is in the best interests of a specific child recognizing that best interests change as the child moves through developmental stages;
- the type of openness that may be appropriate for a child;
- education required for the child, birth family and adoptive family
- what supports may be required to ensure reasonable opportunity for successful planning for the child, birth and adoptive family.

Information required to complete this assessment should be available within the CAS agency and in consultation with people who are already involved with the child(ren) and birth family members and adoptive family (if selected).

☑ Initial Considerations and planning should address the following questions?

- Why the contact?
- Who should be involved in the contact?
- What type of contact should it be?

* Are there issues concerning safety or the child's well-being?

* When should the contact occur?

- Where should the direct contact happen?

- What will be the process of mediation?
Key information to know about the CHILD:

- Child’s attachments/relationships - who/how many
- Child’s developmental level
- Child’s understanding of adoption
- Reason for separation from birth family
- Child’s emotional well-being and stability
- Other stresses the child is experiencing
- Child’s views about ongoing contact with birth family

Key information to know about the BIRTH FAMILY:

- Reasons for permanency plan (abuse, neglect, mental health, parental disability)
  * Safety issues that need to be acknowledged.
- Characteristics of relationship with child
- Birth family views about adoptive placement
- Previous experience with contact
- Ability to respect boundaries
- Stage of grieving and supports to help with resolution
- Ability to accept review, mediation and ongoing supports.

Key Information to know about the ADOPTIVE/KINSHIP family:

(If family has not been selected, identify realistic and concrete factors that will need to be considered in family selection)

- Views about ongoing contact and understanding of importance for a child
  * Experience with accepting new people into extended family constellation
  * Geographic proximity to birth family members
  * Other demands on family time related to this child or other children in the home
• Attitudes toward birth family – empathy
• Adoptive parent’s capacity to set healthy boundaries
• Ability to engage in open communication
• Cultural differences between birth family and adoptive family
• Ability of system to provide family with supports for review, assistance and mediation.

* Parents ability to accept support and be open to change.

**Identify the factors that are likely to support success in openness planning?**

• How can the adults (Birth /kin/foster family & Adoption family) be supported to develop a relationship that will prevent the further loss of birth family connection for child?

**Identify the factors that are most likely to be barriers to success in openness planning (i.e. cannot be mitigated with supports).**

• poor boundaries
• lack of acceptance of "others"
• lack of external family support or understanding
  - lack of community support or understanding

**Propose solutions that can be considered in planning that respect the needs and views of the child:**

• What provisions can be put in place to support the development of a relationship between the adults to facilitate openness? What safety guards can be put in place in the event that they experience difficulties along their journey?
Tips and Strategies for success in Openness planning

Openness planning starts at the very beginning of the adoption process in the form of learning in PRIDE and discussion during the Adoption Homestudy but it is an evolving process throughout the adoption journey. Here are some tips and strategies that may help families throughout the adoption process.

Pre-Adoption

- Read about openness – see some books and articles below
- Talk with families who have openness
- Start early to prepare extended family about the concept of open adoption
- Openly discuss fears and challenges family and friends express
- Discuss views on openness during Homestudy process and ensure your views are included in HS and profile. If your views and perspective change make sure your adoption worker is aware of this and your homestudy is updated to reflect new information.

During the Matching Process

- Meet with Child’s adoption worker and discuss views on openness. Get as much information as possible about family history, family members who will be involved in the openness and a clear understanding of what activities family members hope the ongoing contact will involve.

- Set up direct meetings with people involved in openness to discuss plans. A face to face meeting with all the adults who will be involved in the ongoing contact is very helpful to allying fears and establishing communication.

- Consider creating a written agreement with birth family members to outline some shared vision, communication ground rules and some basic information about the parameters of the ongoing contact. Use KISS principle (Keep it simple silly. The agreement is simply a foundation to support the building of a good rapport and effective communication between two families.

- Start slow as a child needs time to establish relationship in the adoptive family. If too much time is spent with extended family it will be confusing for a child.
• Use creative ways to maintain connections when there are concerns about direct contact between parents. Use the support of the adoption worker and child's worker to support contact during the adoption probation period if necessary.

• Use the support of your adoption worker in during the adoption probation period if needed during visits if needed.

Ongoing Openness

• Openness changes over time. Parents should check in with birth family members and check in with child at regular intervals.

• Relationship should be within the adoptive family context. It is important that adoptive families be included in visits with birth family members especially in the early stages but also much of the time ongoing.

• Whenever possible, it is helpful for a child to have a predictable routine of contacts with birth family members.

• Expect a child to be confused and have emotional reaction to visits. Preparing children for visits and giving time to process feelings after a visit is important.
• If problems arise, be prepared to address them directly and make changes to plans as necessary.

• Always focus on the child’s need for stability in the adoptive family as well as to have a comfortable relationship with birth family members.
Conclusion

The importance of a child having an ongoing relationship with birth family whenever possible is an accepted belief within our Ontario adoption program. At the same time, we are keenly aware of the complexities of bringing together two families through adoption. Ultimately, the success of any plan will be determined by the relationship and positive regard that develops between adoptive and birth family members over time, with the child as witness to this developing relationship and his/her sense of encouragement and normalcy from all family members, whether through biology or legality.

At the point of placement of a child in an adoptive family relationship factors are not known however it is possible to do a thorough job of assessing and preparing all parties for the journey ahead.

The Adoption Council of Ontario believes that every child needs a family and families need support. Supporting families – birth and adoptive – in creating openness plans that will last a lifetime, that change as a child’s needs change, is a key component to both finding families for children and youth in our foster care system who are waiting for placement as well as helping all members of the family constellation, on their lifelong journey of adoption. ACO welcomes inquiries from adoption professionals, birth and adoptive families through our Permanency and Adoption Support Service (PASS) – pass@adoptontario.ca

This paper has been prepared by Pat Convery, Adoption Council of Ontario

April 2016

Pat.convery@adoptontario.ca

info@adoption.on.ca

The Adoption Council of Ontario is a not-for-profit providing outreach, support and education to all adoptees, adoptive parents, potential adoptive parents, birth families, and adoption professionals in Ontario. We deal with public adoption, private adoption, international adoption and relative adoption. Since 1987, we have been working towards a provincial community where all children have families forever.

Permission to copy is granted by the author
Final words and references:

*If a family tree falls in the forest... yes it makes a sound.*

*Open Adoption relationships do often take work, but they are so very worth it!*

~Russell Elkins

**References/Resources**


Holden Lori. (2013) *The Open-Hearted Way to Open Adoption: Helping Your Child to Grow up Whole*

Openness in Adoption -Written by IHS for the Ohio Child Welfare Training Program –Revised January 2009


- Sibling issues in Foster Care and Adoption –
- Openness in Adoption: Building relationships between Birth and Adoptive families
- Working with Birth and Adoptive Families to support Open Adoption

Evan B. Donaldson Institute on Adoption, (2012) *Untangling the Web: The Internet's Transformative Impact on Adoption*


*Adoption Council of Ontario is creating an ongoing resource list of materials and resources. These are posted on our our website:* [https://www.adoption.on.ca/open-for-discussion-resources](https://www.adoption.on.ca/open-for-discussion-resources)