

## OPENNESS IN ADOPTION

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### ADOPTION ETHICS CASE STUDIES

#### Case A—Public Agency Adoption



County A has two brothers, ages four and six, in foster care. The boys, Eddie and Tommy, have been in foster care 18 months and have been with the same foster family during that time.

#### Birth Family

The birth mother abuses a variety of substances, including alcohol and cocaine; she has been in and out of treatment numerous times. She acknowledges that she is unable to care for the children at this point but has been unwilling to sign a voluntary surrender of parental rights. When she visits the boys, she assures them they will be able to live with her again at some point in the future. Eddie and Tommy have different fathers; paternity of the younger child has never been established, and the father of the older child died following a drug-related shooting.

#### Adoptive Family

The foster family is very interested in adopting the boys. They currently dread visits with the birth mother as the boys have behavioral issues both before and after visits. They would prefer an adoption with no face-to-face contact with the birth mother following termination of her parental rights.

#### Agency

The caseworker would like to pursue a non-adversarial adoption with the birth mother signing a voluntary termination of her parental rights. The worker promises the birth mother continued post-adoption contact if she signs a voluntary surrender; the worker adds there will be no post-adoption contact if the birth mother forces the agency to file for a permanent custody order. Further, the worker tells the foster family they must agree to a fully open adoption, in spite of their reservations about contact, in order to proceed with adopting Eddie and Tommy.

## Issues

1. What are the ethical dilemmas involved in this situation?
2. If the birth mother signs a voluntary surrender and the foster parents proceed with adoption as directed by the agency, how do you think this openness arrangement will impact all triad members?
3. How would you guide the participants in ethical decision-making regarding openness?

## **Case B—Private Agency Adoption**



Kidwell, a private adoption agency, is providing birth parent counseling to a young woman who is in her eighth month of pregnancy. The birth mother has indicated her desire to place the child in a fully disclosed adoption with ongoing contact, and she has indicated her desire to choose the adoptive family.

### Birth Family

The birth mother is a 24-year old woman who has not divulged the name of the birth father. She states the birth father is “unknown;” in reality, he is a married man with three children, and he is unaware of this pregnancy. The birth mother is being treated for Bipolar Disorder. She disclosed this information to the caseworker. However, the caseworker, concerned that this would impact the child’s “adoptability,” did not record the information.

### Adoptive Family

Prospective adoptive parents for Kidwell are given little training about openness in adoption during the pre-placement phase. They are told during the pre-service training that the agency promotes openness in adoption, but they are given little rationale for this practice and no guidance about decision-making regarding openness. Prospective adoptive parents are likewise given little information about adoption communication with the child about the birth family or about the adoption itself.

### Agency

The caseworker fears prospective adoptive parents may not agree to adopt this child or agree to openness in the adoption if they are aware of the birth mother's mental health history.

Kidwell believes strongly that birth parents should be empowered to choose the adoptive family for their child. However, the agency very selectively only shows the birth parent one adoptive family profile at a time. If placement with the first family is rejected by the birth parent, the agency provides another profile (again selectively) for the birth parent's consideration, and so on.

### Issues

1. What are the ethical dilemmas involved in this situation?
2. How might these dilemmas be managed?
3. How would you guide the openness decisions in this case to best meet the needs of the child?

## OPENNESS IN ADOPTION

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### Openness Toolbox

Choosing an open adoption relationship requires special skills and abilities on the part of both birth parents and adoptive parents. The key element in facilitating open adoption is the preparation of the birth and prospective adoptive parents. The time period available to prepare the participants in an individual adoption plan may vary from months to days. The role of the adoption professional/assessor is to serve as the navigator, not the captain of the plan. The assessor offers the "map," but the parties choose the direction, route, and speed of the plan. As an assessor, it is important develop a good solid map to prepare for the adoption experience. The following is a list of areas to include in the preparation plan/map.

#### I. **Assessment Phase**

At the outset of adoption planning, the worker must have an understanding of key factors that must be considered when facilitating an openness adoption arrangement, specifically child welfare foster-to-adopt arrangements.

During this assessment period, workers should be aware of basic characteristics of adoptive parents who have been successful with the open adoption experience. These characteristics include:

- A. CONFIDENCE: Adoptive parents have confidence in their own parenting abilities and styles. They do not need to always second-guess themselves about discipline or boundary setting.
- B. RISK TAKING: Adoptive parents are able to take risks. Open adoption relationships require risk taking. Adoptive parents with these on-going relationships need to be able to function without all the answers "up-front" and clear. It is impossible to know all the answers when it comes to working out these types of arrangements.
- C. SENSITIVITY: Adoptive parents are aware of and sensitive to the core issues of adoption that impacts not only their child, but the birth mother as well. Open adoption does not eradicate

the grief, loneliness and guilt for these birthmothers. It can ease feelings of loss, but does not erase them.

A critical component of the Assessment Phase is the consideration of the cultural needs of the birth and adoptive families. Workers should discuss with the parties their family's attitudes, values and beliefs relative to privacy, family relationships, the importance of family history and ancestry. This will assist the worker in developing and facilitating a plan for open adoption that is compatible with the birth and adoptive families' cultural norms. This increases the likelihood of success and decreases the risk of crisis.

Workers involved in open adoption relationships with older child adoption should be aware during this assessment period of their role in the plan. Workers should guide a visitation plan to benefit all members of the triad:

- Who should be in contact with the child?
- How often should they be in contact?
- What is the nature of the contact?
- What support services do all members of the triad need?
- What will be the ongoing role of the worker, if any?

## II. The Education Plan

Part of facilitation of openness in adoption is the educational plan that is developed for the families involved. Educational activities can be divided into two different categories:

A. Group Learning Activities – This aspect of training can include the following information for families:

- 1) Introduce basic adoption education
  - Present language of adoption
  - Instruct on concept of openness
  - Present language of open adoption
  - Introduce adoptive parent and/or birth parent involved in an open arrangement
  - Communicate skills on dealing with attitudes within family/community regarding adoption in general and open adoption

B. Individual Learning Activities – This aspect of training is tailored to meet the needs of each individual adoptive family. These activities can include:

- Give recommended reading lists
- Encourage a visit to an adoptive support group and adult adoptee support group
- Recommend videos such as *Immediate Family* and *Losing Isaiah*

The worker should select educational activities that are compatible with the parent's culture. For example, a parent's values and beliefs may discourage the sharing of personal information to anyone outside the family system. Group learning activities would not be effective and, in fact, would be stressful to that person. Individual learning activities may be more appropriate and effective.

### III. Decision Making

Decision-making is an important aspect of the facilitation of open adoption relationships. In many cases, families who come to adoption through infertility come with damaged decision making skills. Part of the worker's job is to help the family repair their damaged decision making abilities. This is done by:

- Helping the family to see themselves as parents, not as an infertile couple
- Not making the decisions for couples at a pressure point
- Reinforcing their decision making by asking "What do you want?" "What do you need?"

### IV. Relationship Building

Open adoption is a relationship, pure and simple. The nature of the relationship will vary as greatly as the individuals involved. Factors such as culture, family history, and gender will impact how relationships are formed and maintained. The worker's role is first to prepare the parties for the time of the initial meeting.

It is somewhat like helping a friend to get ready for a blind date:

- How to make a good impression
- What to talk about
- What if I'm asked a question I'm not prepared to answer
- Where do we meet--what is a "safe" place
- What if I don't like them
- Anticipation of questions

Also like a blind date, open relationships may fizzle or take off after the initial "date" or meeting. If the relationship starts to grow and evolve, the worker should be there to assist in answering questions, be a sounding board or consultant.

The worker is not supposed to be the glue that bonds the relationship but the temporary support to enable the bonding to occur. The ultimate goal for an open relationship should be for the parties involved to maintain a positive relationship without the assistance of the worker. Communication is key to any successful relationship. Cultural differences in communication styles and behaviors can lead to misunderstanding and misinterpretation on the part of birth and/or adoptive parents. The worker should be able to determine problem areas that are communication difficulties.

Once communication difficulties are identified the worker may address these with the birth parents and adoptive parents to work toward improving the communication. The worker should also be able to remind and reassure the parties that some relationships are not workable/acceptable for parties. Open adoption is a life-long commitment. That is a long time to be in a relationship that is not a positive experience. It is the best interests of everyone, especially the child, that this is addressed prior to entering a permanent relationship.

## Questions for Birth Parents – A Self-Assessment

The following are questions to ask yourself concerning your adoption decision. You can discuss your answers with your worker.

- 1) Why am I choosing adoption?
  
- 2) How do I define open adoption?
  
- 3) What do I want in an adoption?
  
- 4) What do I want for my child in an adoption?
  
- 5) What are my major concerns and fears about this open adoption?
  
- 6) What is my vision for my open adoption in the...
  - First year
  - Five years from now
  - Ten years from now?
  
- 7) What qualities do I hope for in an adoptive parent?



## **Questions for Adoptive Parents – A Self-Assessment (Special Needs/Older Child Placement)**

The following are questions to ask yourself concerning your adoption decision. You can discuss your answers with your worker.

- 1. Why am I choosing adoption?**
  
- 2. How do I define open adoption?**
  
- 3. What do I want in an adoption?**
  
- 4. What do I want for my child in an adoption?**
  
- 5. What are my major concerns and fears about this open adoption?**
  
- 6. What is my vision for my open adoption in the...**
  - First year
  - Five years from now
  - Ten years from now?
  
- 7. What qualities do I hope for in a birth parent?**

## Open Adoption Issues and Questions for Special Needs/Older Children Adoptive Parents

(These issues/questions should be discussed with the adoptive parents)

During the initial home study and pre-finalization period, the worker should focus on the family's willingness and ability to acknowledge and explore adoption issues, both personally and with others.

- a. How open is the family to examine their motivation for adoption?
- b. How comfortable is the family with the similarities and differences created by adoptive family life as compared to biological parenting?
- c. How willing and able is the family to discuss difficult and emotionally charged issues related to their child's past. How have the parents discussed other sensitive or difficult topics within the family?
- d. How well does the adoptive family understand the child's need to feel some level of connection to the birth family? (That connection may not be physical, but emotional through communication. Parents must always remember that for a child to develop a healthy sense of value, they need to feel valued – even from the birth parents who did not or could not care for them)<sup>1</sup>
- e. How have the parents handled the discussion around dealing with difficult relatives?

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<sup>1</sup> Brodzinsky, David Smith, D.W & Brodzinsky, A. (1998) *Children's Adjustment to Adoption: Developmental and Clinical Issues*, (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publishing)

### Additional Behavioral Questions to Ask

- a. Give an example of a time that you have had to choose to meet the needs of a child (or someone else) over the needs or demands of another. What did you do and how did it work out?
- b. Tell me about a time where you had experienced rejection from someone in whom you have invested a lot of time. What was the reason for the rejection (loyalty to another)? What did you do, and how did it work out? (This question addresses the parent's ability to deal with the child's rejecting behavior due to birth parent loyalties.)
- c. Give examples of how you have helped a child (or another person) through a major disappointment. What did you do and how did it work out? (This question addresses the parent's ability to deal with a child's pain as a result of missed contacts.)
- d. How have you managed boundary issues with your extended family and close friends? What have been instances of boundary violation and what did you do? How did it work out? (This addresses the parent's ability as the adoptive family to establish boundaries and guidelines.)

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### BRIDGING THE GAP OF SEPARATION BETWEEN CHILDREN AND THEIR FAMILIES A CONTINUUM OF CONTACT FOR FOSTER PARENTS

- EXCHANGE LETTERS WITH CHILD'S FAMILY VIA SW
- CALL CHILD'S PARENTS ON PHONE
- REQUEST PICTURES OF CHILD'S FAMILY TO DISPLAY IN CHILD'S ROOM
- GIVE PARENTS PICTURES OF CHILD
- SHARE COPIES OF HOMEWORK & REPORT CARDS WITH FAMILY
- HAVE POSITIVE VIEW ABOUT BP
- TALK OPENLY ABOUT FAMILY TO CHILD
- SEND SNACK/ACTIVITY FOR VISIT
- PRAISE PARENTS' PROGRESS
- DRESS CHILD UP FOR VISITS
- PROVIDE WRITTEN REPORT FOR SAR
- SHARE MONTHLY PROGRESS REPORTS
- HOST/ARRANGE SIBLING VISITS
- BRAG TO PARENT ABOUT CHILD
- REQUEST CULTURAL INFORMATION FROM BP
- TRANSPORT CHILD TO VISIT
- TALK WITH PARENT AT VISIT
- ENCOURAGE PARENT TO PHONE CHILD
- MEET CHILD'S FAMILY AT PLACEMENT
- NON THREATENING ATTITUDE
- REFER TO CHILD AS "YOUR CHILD" TO BP
- SHARE PARENTING INFORMATION
- ATTEND STAFFINGS, SARs, REVIEWS
- HELP BP FIND COMMUNITY RESOURCES
- ENCOURAGE / REASSURE REUNIFICATION
- SHARE CHILD'S LIFE BOOK WITH PARENTS
- ATTEND TRAINING TO LEARN HOW TO WORK DIRECTLY WITH PARENT
- LEARN ABOUT, UNDERSTAND, AND RESPECT BIRTH PARENT'S CULTURE
- TRANSPORT CHILD TO/FROM PARENT'S HOME
- REVIEW CHILD'S VISITS WITH PARENTS
- GIVE PARENTS VERBAL PROGRESS REPORTS
- ASK PARENT TO COME TO APPTS.
- FP TRANSPORTS BP TO MEETINGS
- INVITE CHILD'S FAMILY TO ATTEND SCHOOL PROGRAMS
- ASSIST IN PLANNING CHILD'S RETURN TO BIRTH HOME
- WELCOME CHILD'S PARENTS INTO YOUR HOME
- ATTEND PARENTING CLASSES WITH PARENTS
- SERVE AS SUPPORT TO FAMILY FOLLOWING REUNIFICATION
- FOSTER PARENT PROVIDES RESPITE CARE
- INCLUDE BP IN FAREWELL ACTIVITIES

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### Seven Wonders of Adoption

#### **Wonder # 1: Loss and Grief**

"I wonder why I lose everyone and everything that is important to me. What is the matter with me?"

#### **Wonder # 2: Rejection/ Abandonment**

"I wonder if these people are really going to keep me."

#### **Wonder # 3: Guilt and Shame**

"I wonder what I did to make my own parents throw me away."

#### **Wonder # 4: Trust**

"I wonder if I can believe what these people are telling me."

#### **Wonder # 5: Identity and Self-Esteem**

"I wonder who my people are and if I will be like them."

#### **Wonder # 6: Control**

"I wonder why everyone else makes decisions about my family, my name, how much information I get, how old I have to be to meet my siblings or birth parents...When do I get to make important decisions about my life?"

#### **Wonder # 7: Divided Loyalties**

"I wonder if I should remain loyal to my birth mother or if I should allow myself to love and be loved by my adoptive mother."

-Betsy Smalley

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### Addressing a Child's Expectations, Fantasies, and Fears

#### Questions to Ask About Contact

1. What kind of contact do you want (phone/email/social media/face to face)?
2. How often do you think you would like to have contact with them?
3. How do you feel about meeting them?
4. How do you think they feel about having contact with you?
5. If you want to meet them, what do you think the first meeting will be like?
6. What questions do you hope your birth parents can answer?
7. What are the most important things for them to know about you?
8. What do you think would be the best thing that could happen if you are able to have contact with your birth family?
9. What would be the worst thing that could happen if you were to have contact?
10. Do you think things will change in your adoptive home? If so, how?

#### Questions to Ask About Face to Face Meetings

1. Would you like to contact them by letter or phone prior to meeting them?
2. What questions or information would you like to have before a visit or contact?
3. Where do you want the visit to take place?
4. What do you want to do at the visit?
5. What questions do you want to ask your birth mother or birth father?
6. What would you like to tell your birth family about yourself, your family, school, etc.?
7. What do you think your birth parents are going to say to you?
8. What do you want to wear?
9. Are there items you want to take with you to show them such as a report card, trophies/awards, pictures, etc.? Do you want to take a gift or card for them?
10. Who would you want to be with you, if anyone, at the visit?
11. What signals could we use if you change your mind or want to end the visit?
12. What do you want to do after the meeting?