

Ongoing {fears and realities} Contact

Written by
Kathleen Silber, MSW, ACSW

Prospective adopting couples usually enter the adoption process somewhat fearful of open adoption in general and ongoing contact in particular. After all the years and frustrations of infertility, you just want to adopt a baby—not the birthmother! It seems easier just to ‘take the baby and run’ and not have to deal with adoption or birthparents. But what seems like an easy solution initially may not be the best situation for the long term.

Many adoptive parents with traditional adoptions think this type of adoption is “ideal” until the child reaches school age and starts to ask questions. All of a sudden, they are unable to answer their child’s questions. Instead, they repeatedly must respond to each question with, “I don’t know.” This becomes painful and frustrating because as parents you want to be able to answer your child’s questions about everything, and you do not want to see your child suffer. It quickly becomes obvious that no matter how much you all love each other, your child still has a basic need to know about his roots. Adopted children fare better when there are answers to their questions instead of becoming obsessed with unanswered questions, and with concrete information, rather than abstract concepts.

Open adoption — particularly if there is ongoing contact — provides answers for children on an ongoing basis and provides concrete information, instead of abstracts. Both contribute to positive mental health. When there is ongoing contact, the birthmother is someone who is “real” to the child and, therefore, easier to understand. The child is able to see concrete evidence of the birthmother’s love for him (e.g. a hug or a gift—both confirmations of her love and caring) which is very important for his self-esteem. He feels loved by all of his parents, instead of feeling rejected and abandoned by his original parents.

But, so what if open adoption is better for your child? What about you? How can you feel okay about ongoing contact? You will find that once you are able to feel comfortable with the differences between biological parenting and adoptive parenting (e.g. a reality is that your child has two sets of parents— one who gave birth to him and one who is parenting

him), it seems easier to accept the birthparents’ role in your lives. Once you actually become parents you also realize that you are the parents (you are the ones who are there every day, you are the ones that your child recognizes as “Mom” and “Dad,” etc). Even though your child may see the birthparents on a regular basis, they are not the parents. They can have a place in your lives, but not as the parents. Once you realize that, it seems less frightening to have an ongoing relationship with them.

It helps if you can view the birth-parents as relatives. In fact, they are relatives because they are related to your child. If you can accept them as relatives, it may be easier to feel comfortable with an ongoing relationship. After all, you probably have ongoing contact with your other relatives, even those you do not particularly like — you may see them once or twice a year, at holidays or birthdays, simply because they are relatives. It is the same with adoption! With ongoing contact, the birthparents and their family become part of your extended family. If there are relationship problems or other problems, you work them out as you do with other family relationship problems. If extra help is needed, you can seek out adoption mediation services to help resolve the differences.

So, you may want to risk moving past the fears that everyone enters into this process with to a relationship which is built on trust and love. After all, your child cannot have too many people in his life who love him (no one can have too much love!)—a little extra love will only help build a positive self-concept.

Kathleen Silber, MSW, ACSW, is the IAC’s Associate Executive Director and Clinical Director. She is a nationally regarded expert, has written groundbreaking books including “Dear Birthmother” and “Children of Open Adoption” and has advocated extensively for open adoption.