Open Adoption

What We Know

› Adoption is the permanent, legal transfer of parental rights and responsibilities from birth parents (BPs) to adoptive parents (APs), with the goal of ensuring that children whose BPs are unwilling or unable to care for them have a legal family to nurture and support them.[22,30] Adoption is also understood to be a lifelong process involving complex, dynamic relationships between children, their biological families, and their adoptive families that take place in the context of their communities and cultures[9,19]

• Adoptions may be independent/private (i.e., BPs make voluntary adoption plans for their children, most often during infancy), through a public agency (i.e., state or county social service departments make adoption plans for children in foster care when BPs are unable to provide a safe home and their parental rights have been terminated), or intercountry (i.e., adoption of children from other countries)[1]

› During much of the 20th century, adoption in many Western countries involved a high degree of confidentiality and secrecy, which was designed to protect those involved from the stigma associated with birth to unmarried women and with infertility, as well as to prevent BPs from intruding in the adoptive family. Over the past several decades, however, adoption practice has increasingly shifted toward more openness, both in the sharing of information with children and in the amount of contact between members of the adoption triad (i.e., BPs, APs, and adopted children)[29]

• Whereas closed adoption practices emphasized the adoptive parents as exclusive replacement parents, open adoption often involves ongoing relationships with the child's original family, reconfiguring how kinship relationships are experienced in adoption[26]

› The term open adoption describes a continuum of practices involving the exchange of information, communication, and in some instances ongoing contact between members of the adoption triad[19,29]

• Confidential, or "closed," adoptions are those in which no identifying information is exchanged and no contact occurs between BPs and APs. In closed adoptions, APs receive only non-identifying information about birth parents at the time of the adoption (e.g., physical characteristics, educational level, religion, family medical/mental health history). Approximately 5% of current United States adoptions are completely closed[29]

• Mediated, or semi-open, adoptions are those in which a designated third party, often the agency that manages the adoption, facilitates the exchange of non-identifying information, letters, photographs, and/or gifts between BPs and APs, who do not have direct contact. Mediated adoptions constitute approximately 40% of United States adoptions[29]

• Fully disclosed, or "open," adoptions, in which BPs and APs meet and exchange identifying information at the beginning and continue to communicate over time, constitute 55% of current adoptions in the United States. Almost half of these families also have ongoing visits.[29] In one study, the majority of BPs visited 1–4 times yearly[18]

  – Children are most likely to have contact with BPs in private domestic adoption (68%), whereas only 39% of children adopted through public agencies have contact and 6% of children adopted internationally do[1]

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July 12, 2019

› Openness in adoption can be conceptualized in terms of communication openness and structural openness[29]

- Communication openness refers to APs' practices regarding telling children that they were adopted, facilitating adoption-relatedconversations, and responding to children's needs for information and for emotional processing of the adoption[29]

  – Although in the past it was common practice not to tell children that they were adopted until adulthood, if at all, the vast majority (97%) of currently adopted children ages 5 and older have been told they were adopted[30]

  – Adoption communication varies on a continuum from restricted (e.g., revealing adoption status in a single conversation) to open and ongoing communication. Researchers in one study found that receiving preparation for adoption communication during the adoption process, comfort while speaking about the child's origins, empathy for the birth parents, and having more open communication as a couple were associated with more open and regular adoption communication[3]

  – Children's understanding of adoption, and their need for adoption-related information, changes over the course of development[5]

    - Preschoolers first begin to learn the "language of adoption." Although they cannot yet comprehend the difference between their family and those of others, introducing the concept at this age lays the groundwork for open communication as they mature
    - School-aged children recognize for the first time the significance of biological relationships and that being adopted also means the loss of a birth family. They begin to wonder about how they came to be adopted and whether their BPs think of them or miss them
    - Adolescents are better able to grasp the implications of adoption and can potentially begin to understand their BPs' life decisions. They begin to integrate adoption and their connection to birth and adoptive families into their emerging identities
    - Adoption-related issues can continue to reemerge during adulthood, sometimes triggered by milestones such as getting married, having a baby, or the death of the AP

- Structural openness refers to the continuum of contact between birth and adoptive families, ranging from the exchange of letters and/or phone calls to in-person visits[17,29]

  – Post-adoption contact is more likely when BPs and APs are able to establish open communication, roles, and boundaries prior to the adoption. Having an agreement for postadoption contact at the time of adoption, whether an implied agreement or a legal one, also increases the likelihood of contact after adoption[10]

    - In the United States, statutes allowing enforceable postadoption contact agreements exist in 26 states and the District of Columbia. Although such provisions typically are limited to BPs, in some states courts may allow other significant birth family members to be included, including, in six states, siblings[7]

    - In England and Wales, the 2002 Adoption and Children Act requires that agencies thoroughly explore contact issues prior to finalization;[19] some degree of postadoption contact is common.[18] Sibling contact may be addressed as part of the postadoption contact plan[8]

    - A few countries, including New Zealand, require that all adoptions be open[22]

  – Adoptive mothers tend to be more involved in facilitating contact with birth parents than adoptive fathers[12]

  – Visits most often involve the birth mother; contact between birth fathers and children is less common[27]

  – In a 2016 study, researchers found that the involvement of adopted siblings in birth family connections was associated with a more positive view of adoption, greater interest in birth family contact, and better adjustment in adoptees[11]

  – Secure attachment to adoptive parents and open communication about adoption are associated with greater satisfaction with birth parent contact during emerging adulthood[12]

  – Some adopted children in an Italian study of open adoptions benefited from contact with birth parent(s), whereas others did not. The quality of the contact rather than the number of episodes contacts was determined to be more influential on the outcome of contact[2]

  – Children adopted through intercountry adoption or foster care are less likely to have postadoption contact than those adopted privately[1,10,14]

    - The possibility of openness in some intercountry adoptions may be limited because of distance and cultural norms and sanctions in the child's country of origin regarding birth out of wedlock[1,14]

- In public agency adoptions, psychosocial issues of BPs, previous maltreatment, and children's preexisting relationships with their birth families raise concerns that postadoption contact could jeopardize children's physical and/or psychological safety and adjustment.[17]The adversarial nature of the court process also may interfere with the relationship between BPs and APs and/or the court may prohibit contact[10]
  – Barriers to open adoption include beliefs among some professionals and families that closed adoption avoids confusion, dual loyalties, and competition between BPs and APs and protects children[18]
  – During adolescence, youths who have not had contact with their BPs may seek it on their own[15] or may respond to contact from older siblings or birth family members[21]
    - The availability of cell phones, email, and social media (e.g., Facebook) has made it easier for birth families and children to contact one another without the awareness of the adoptive family[18,21]
    - Although contact may be inevitable and important to the adolescent's adjustment, often boundaries, structure, and consideration of potential safety issues are needed[31]
- A growing body of research indicates that open adoption generally is perceived by all parties as beneficial[13,15,20,25,28]
  – A longitudinal study of families who adopted infants and maintained open adoption arrangements throughout their childhoods found that APs viewed the experience positively and felt that it was in their children's best interests.[28] The adoptees, as young adults, reported experiencing contact as a normal part of their lives and benefiting from it in a variety of ways[27]
  – Ongoing contact in adoption is associated with APs' having more positive feelings about birth mothers,[15] helps APs feel less threatened by the BPs' ties to the child,[20] is linked with greater satisfaction with the adoption process in both APs and birth mothers,[13] is linked with better postadoption adjustment in birth mothers,[6,13] and assists the child to integrate both families into his or her sense of self[28] and attain a more positive sense of identity[29]
- Research has not shown an association between communication openness or contact and externalizing behaviors in the adopted child[18] or between communication openness or contact and his or her emotional/behavioral development[24]
- Although postadoption contact is positive in many situations, the potential benefits and risks of contact should be assessed individually for each child and family. Postadoption contact is not always feasible or in the best interests of the child[22]

What We Can Do

› Learn about adoption and openness in adoption so you can accurately assess your clients' personal characteristics and education needs; share this information with your colleagues
› Develop an awareness of your own cultural values, beliefs, and biases and develop knowledge about the histories, traditions, and values of your clients. Adopt treatment methodologies that reflect the cultural needs of the client[4,16,23]
› Practice with awareness of, and adherence to, the social work principles of respect for human rights and human dignity, social justice, and professional conduct as described in the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) Statement of Ethical Principles. Become knowledgeable of the IFSW ethical standards as they apply to adoption, and practice accordingly[16]
› Refer to online sites for additional resources and educational materials; for example,
  • Adoption Council of Canada, http://www.adoption.ca/home
  • Adoption.com, http://www.adoption.com
  • The Donaldson Adoption Institute, https://www.adoptioninstitute.org/
› Provide education, coaching, and support to assist APs to establish and/or maintain age-appropriate openness in communicating with their children regarding adoption and adoption-related issues
› Provide education to BPs and APs regarding the benefits and challenges of ongoing communication and/or contact in adoption. Assist them in assessing their own situation and needs to determine what, if any, degree of ongoing communication and/or contact would be in the child's best interests, as well as defining role expectations and boundaries
  • Openness needs to be considered on a case-by-case basis[28]
  • Postadoption contact agreements, if developed, should be sufficiently flexible to allow for the needs of participants to change over time[14,18] and should be entered into without duress or fear of perceived consequences of not agreeing[25]
  • Pre-adoption meetings between BPs and APs help develop relationships[10]

- Educate BPs and APs about managing complex relationship[9]

  –Contact should not be equated with "co-parenting." The BP takes on a special kinship role but does not have decision-making rights[29]

- Prepare adoptive families for potential contact regardless of their intentions, as electronic media have facilitated more ready access and contact[21,27]

- Educate APs regarding the importance of sibling ties and explore the feasibility of postadoption contact with siblings[8]

Coding Matrix
References are rated using the following codes, listed in order of strength:

M	Published meta-analysis	**RV**	Published review of the literature	**PP**	Policies, procedures, protocols
SR	Published systematic or integrative literature review	**RU**	Published research utilization report	**X**	Practice exemplars, stories, opinions
RCT	Published research (randomized controlled trial)	**QI**	Published quality improvement report	**GI**	General or background information/texts/reports
R	Published research (not randomized controlled trial)	**L**	Legislation	**U**	Unpublished research, reviews, poster presentations or other such materials
C	Case histories, case studies	**PGR**	Published government report		
G	Published guidelines	**PFR**	Published funded report	**CP**	Conference proceedings, abstracts, presentation

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