

Open Adoption: A Reference Guide for Families

Openness brings great benefits to all involved, as well as some unique dilemmas. Addressing them requires flexibility, sensitivity to the birth family, and confidence in yourself as parents. Here's how to make it work for your family. **BY JONI MANTELL, LCSW**



Open adoption is a scary phrase. When I first heard it, I wondered, would I feel like a ‘stand in’ or a ‘rent-a-mom?’” says Christine, from New Jersey. This is the most common initial reaction prospective parents have—that open adoption is “co-parenting.” Others may come to domestic adoption worrying that the birth parents will lack boundaries or want the child back, or that their child will grow up confused about who their parents are.

You will likely learn that these fears are un-

founded during your pre-adoption training. Typically, birth mothers choose adoption because they know they can't parent any child at this time, children know that their parents are the ones who tuck them in at night and share in their daily tears and joys, and, no matter how open the adoption, the adoptive parents are the one who make all of the parenting decisions after placement.

Parents become believers in open adoption as they learn that their concerns won't come to pass, and about the benefits it will bring their children. As Susan, from New York,

your heart until the adoption is final.

➔ **Gather some information for your child now.** It is never possible to know how everyone will feel post-placement. It is not uncommon for birth parents to withdraw due to grief or the stress in their lives. Given this possibility, gather some information that you think your child would like to know now. Along with any more practical medical history, record your observations—the birth mother’s infectious giggle, that she puts ketchup on everything. Your child will treasure any information you can share about her birth parents.

DILEMMA #1: Asking About an Absent Birth Father

➔ **COMMONLY ASKED:** “Our son’s birth mother was involved with his birth father only briefly. We’d like to know more about our son’s birth father but don’t know how to ask without sounding nosy or judgmental about the brevity of their relationship.”

➔ **OBJECTIVE:** Gathering information for your child has nothing to do with judgment and everything to do with helping him form a strong identity. Social and medical paperwork should take care of the big questions. However, the everyday details that adoptive parents can often learn by talking with birth family are the ones that kids often love to hear.

➔ **SUGGESTED WORDS:** “We know that our son will be very curious about both of his biological parents, especially as he gets older and wants to understand more about his origins. We would love to be able to tell our son anything, however small the detail, that you might be willing to share about his birth father—how he looked, his hair and eye colors, favorite sport, food [taste in music, favorite team, favorite author, idiosyncratic habits].”

From what we’ve learned, it seems that kids love tidbits that they may be able to relate to their own lives.”

DRAFTING YOUR POST-ADOPTION CONTACT AGREEMENT

Expectant parents and adoptive parents should discuss their expectations for ongoing contact in advance and set down in writing what’s known as a post-adoption contact agreement (PACA). It will probably feel awkward at the time, but making clear plans for the type of contact (photos, Skype, visits, and so on), as well as a schedule for the updates, will help avoid future disappointment.

“PACAs are not enforceable under many state laws,” notes Robin Fleischner, a fellow of the American Academy of Adoption Attorneys. “In New York, for example, the agreement is part of the birth parent’s consent and a proceeding can be brought in court to require compliance. In other states, PACAs are not enforceable in court.” Nevertheless, she and most adoption professionals agree that a PACA is a good idea, whether court-enforceable or not, to start your relationship on an honest and healthy note. If there is a breakdown in the agreement, it’s a good idea to seek counseling.

As Lisa, an adoptive mom from Westport, Connecticut, says, “The schedule helped us to feel that the birth parents’ needs were being met and that we had some structure.”

When drafting your PACA:

➔ **Keep the focus on the child’s best interest.** “Rather than start right out discussing numbers of times per year for visits and so on, start with a discussion about your commitment to openness because you truly believe it will benefit the child. Then work from there,” says Nina E. Rumbold, a New York and New Jersey adoption attorney.

➔ **Under-promise and over-deliver.** While determining future contact, keep in mind

think that one of your male friends is her birth father, and we don't want to confuse her until she is better able to understand adoption. We hope you understand."

And somewhere in the middle are families that are comfortable with visits during the pre-verbal years (up to age three), but then prefer to wait until the child expresses personal initiative for contact.

A birth mother from New York City describes her reaction to this shift in visits:

"Now that Sarah's six, her parents feel that she has to be the one to ask to meet me. Initially, I was disappointed that they didn't bring her when we met for dinner, because I just wanted to have a 'play date.' But after thinking about it, I realized they weren't pushing me out. They were simply putting Sarah first, and that's always how it should be. They brought drawings she'd done at school and showed me pictures on their phones. It was lovely. I also realized maybe I wasn't ready to answer the kind of big picture questions a six-year-old might have. We're thinking Sarah will probably want to meet me soon, but I will seek some prepping before that meeting."

POST-ADOPTION:

NAVIGATING COMMON BUMPS

➔ **You will have less time to check in.** It's thoughtful to call your child's birth mother after you get home from the hospital to let her know the baby is doing well. After that, the relationship may naturally decrease in intensity. If you were in frequent contact during the match, you might gently but directly explain that you'll be calling less often now that you have to focus on the baby. Acknowledge that this transition may be difficult.

➔ **The birth mother may pull back.** This is especially common in the first year or two after the placement. Try to build in an option for her to let you know she needs space and

ask if you can continue to contact her if there is a question or something the child needs to know. Continue to send updates even if you don't always hear back.

DILEMMA #3: A Birth Mother Who's Withdrawn from Contact

➔ **COMMONLY ASKED:** "We were advised that most birth mothers grieve intensely after placement. In our case, it's been six months since we adopted and we've received only one brief email from our daughter's birth mother. We don't want to intrude, but we want her to know that we are thinking of her. What can we do?"

➔ **OBJECTIVE:** Let the birth mother know the child is doing well and that you care about her and how she is doing. Show your interest in her as a person by referring to something personal (a movie she was looking forward to, a hobby). Give her the option of staying connected with a simple reply, without necessarily sharing her deeper feelings, and assure her that you welcome hearing from her whenever she feels comfortable.

➔ **SUGGESTED WORDS:** "We are thinking about you and want to let you know that Sophia is doing really well. She just tried applesauce for the first time and loves it. Wondering how you are and if you've started your summer garden yet. Please know that we respect that this may be a difficult time for you and we understand if you need space. We won't take it personally and will always be interested in hearing from you, whenever you're ready. Our warmest regards."

If a birth parent withdraws several years into the relationship, this may understandably be upsetting to a child who was looking forward to a visit or didn't get her birthday phone call. It's important to keep an open di-

alogue with your child and, if necessary, have her speak with an adoption counselor about her hurt feelings. While a birth parent's withdrawal will be painful, it may also give the child insight into why she was unable to parent and made an adoption plan.

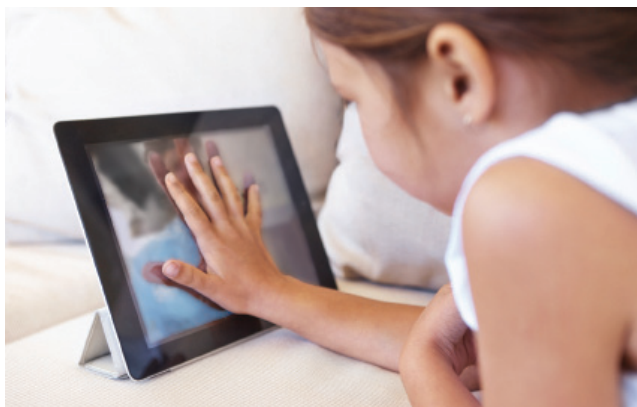
➔ **Roles can get confused.** "Our son's birth mother wanted me to let her know if he was sick or had a broken arm," says Christine, from New Jersey. "I had to be honest and tell her that I would not reach out in the moment because my focus would be on getting him medical attention."

➔ **Names are sensitive topics on both sides of the relationship.** Who is called "Mom"? How will we refer to birth grandparents? Birth siblings? What will our child call his birth mother?

Four-year-old Maddie received a card signed, "Daddy is so excited to see you," prior to a planned visit. Her father fired off an angry email to her birth father, stating: "I am her father. I acknowledge your role as her birth father, but I consider myself her dad and I expect you to respect it." Although he regretted the tone of his email, he remained adamant about being the only "Dad."

A mom from New Jersey says, "The first Christmas, our son received gifts from his birth mom's family signed 'Aunt,' 'Uncle,' 'Grandma,' and 'Grandpa.' I explained to our son's birth mom that, while we appreciated the gifts, we were not comfortable with this. We had not discussed names before this, so they had probably been confused about what names to use, but she totally understood and they adjusted right away."

Whether the issue is the adoptive parent's sensitivity, insecurity, or wish for respect, it is not uncommon for adoptive parents to want to be the only ones called "Mom" or "Dad." If this is your preference, you can sensitively explain that you need to feel like the real mom, and that sharing the title makes you feel personally uncomfortable, even insecure. It's most common for kids to call their birth parents by their first names, though some families use terms like "Mama Katie."



Parents will want to evaluate their own fears and concerns, and factor in their child's spontaneous choices with respect to naming. Some worry about how to refer to birth siblings, then find that their child naturally uses the terms "brother" and "sister." In most situations, a sensitive discussion and how you relate to the birth parents is ultimately more important than what titles you use.

DILEMMA #4: Establishing Names You Feel Comfortable With

➔ **COMMONLY ASKED:** "Our son's birth mother sent him a birthday card and signed it 'Mommy.' This makes me uncomfortable. What can I say?" or "The expectant mother's mom hopes that our son will call her 'Grandma.' We want her to be part of our son's life, but my parents are looking forward to being 'Grandma and Grandpa.' How do I explain?"

➔ **OBJECTIVE:** To define roles between the adults, and in relation to the child. It is in the best interests of the child that adoptive parents feel entitled to be the primary parents, and to make parenting decisions they are comfortable with. Some families are more flexible than others about extended family titles, so this conversation will vary based on your preferences.

➔ **SUGGESTED WORDS:** "We are saving everything you send so our son can see

it when he is older. We will be referring to you as his birth mother, and will call you Catherine on visits. We think it will be less confusing for him if you use similar terminology. I am more comfortable retaining the term ‘Mommy’ just for me. I hope you understand.”

➔ **SUGGESTED WORDS ABOUT GRANDPARENTS:** “We are reserving these titles for the grandparents in our family, but would be happy to come up with alternatives. How would your mother feel about being ‘Nana’ or ‘Grammy’?”

Adoptive parents must also be sensitive about referring to the birth parents. Many adoptive parents say “our birth mom” when they are talking about their child’s birth mom. While the pronoun “our” may be a vestige from the pre-adopt days, it was never really accurate. She was never “yours” and may hear this as demeaning. Similarly, on adoption message boards, it’s common to use shorthand such as “DH” for “Dear Husband,” “DS” for “Dear Son,” and so on, but many feel that “Birth Mother” should not be shortened to “BM,” because of the other thing that stands for. Erring on the side of sensitivity is always a good idea in these complex relationships.

➔ **You worry about sharing on social media.** You may want to anticipate this bump by including a clause in the PACA, such as: “Birth parents may not post photos of the child on Facebook or other social media sites without the express permission of the adoptive parents,” says Joy Goldstein, LCSW, executive director of Forever Families Through Adoption.

E. Stefani Moon, adoption program manager/New Jersey and New York of Open Arms Adoption Agency, believes that birth and adoptive families should not be Facebook friends, especially in the beginning of the relationship, because it is too easy for things to

be misconstrued online, and you can’t control insensitive comments. “For example, after an adoptive mom posted a picture, one of her friends wrote, ‘What a cutie! How could anyone have given him away?’ Imagine being the child’s birth mother and seeing that?”

KEEPING THE RELATIONSHIP

WARM AS YOUR CHILD GROWS

Regardless of the level of openness you’ve established, do whatever you can to keep the relationship “warm,” including:

➔ **Communicate:** Some issues are unique to adoption and others are the kind of misunderstandings that happen all the time in extended families, but that cause discomfort when it’s the birth family. Always try to be as honest as possible, as well as mindful of each person’s sensitivities and personality.

DILEMMA #5: Responding to a Request for Funds

➔ **COMMONLY ASKED:** “Our daughter’s birth mother contacted me and asked us for money. We don’t feel comfortable sending her money, but we also don’t feel right knowing that she’s in need. What should we do, and how would we explain our decision to her?”

➔ **OBJECTIVE:** Let her know that you are concerned and care about her, but that you do not want this relationship to be blemished by money. You might refer her to a support organization, like On Your Feet Foundation, or ask your agency if she might be eligible for any grants.

➔ **SUGGESTED WORDS:** “Due to the nature of our relationship with you, we don’t feel comfortable sending you money. In our family we have learned that giving or loaning money stresses relationships, and we want this open adoption to stand the test of time for our child, and for all

of us. I can send you some information about some organizations that might be able to help.”

➔ **Be consistent:** Follow the contact schedule you agreed to in your PACA, even when you don't get replies.

➔ **Be flexible:** “If the birth mother requests an extra visit or something that was not agreed upon, I believe you should say yes to it unless it is something you are totally uncomfortable with,” says a mom from Princeton, New Jersey. “My daughter's birth mother requested pictures of the baby's room and crib about two days after we brought her home. I didn't have any problem taking several photos and mailing them to her.”

➔ **Over-deliver if things go well.** It's best to determine a schedule for visits when you write up your PACA, but be open to increased contact as you get to know each other. You may find the visits help your child with his questions and his sense of identity.

➔ **Be open-minded:** Your child's birth mother may open up to you more once you've won her trust. What a woman in a crisis pregnancy tells the agency when she is scared and just hoping to find a loving home for her child may not be the whole situation. Be forgiving of any new details you learn. Ultimately this information may help your child to better understand his story.

➔ **Get professional guidance** if you are having difficulty with, considering withdrawing from, or opening up your adoption. If you feel comfortable doing so, encourage the birth parents to seek guidance as well.

➔ **Remember that each open adoption is unique.** There is no single formula. The only universal is the fact that you will adjust the relationship over time. Each family will need to determine what works for them in the best interests of their child.



When Contact Is Challenging Watch for an article on managing openness in the face of significant trials, such as a birth parent who battles addiction, or is incarcerated.

DILEMMA #6: Keeping Your Family Respectful Toward the Birth Mother

➔ **COMMONLY ASKED:** “We'd like to invite our son's birth mother to his first birthday party, but we are concerned about what our family members might say or do around her. What do we say to them?”

➔ **OBJECTIVE:** Help your family understand your comfort with open adoption, and why it is important to celebrate with everyone who is special to your son. Be direct and clear in explaining boundaries they should not cross. If you don't think that they can respect those, you may want to consider separate celebrations for this birthday.

➔ **SUGGESTED WORDS:** “We know you are surprised by our openness and we hope that, over time, this may make more sense to you. Whether or not you can truly understand it now, we still hope you can support us in our wish to have everyone celebrate our son's birthday together. While this may feel awkward for you, all you need to do is show his birth mother the same friendliness and respect you would show any of our guests, with one caveat—the adoption plan is a private matter that is off limits for discussion. We hope you can join us and help make our son's birthday a most wonderful and memorable family occasion.”

As a mom from Bucks County, Pennsylvania, said, “I remember open adoption being scary to me. What people need to realize is that it is just a phrase that each family individually defines. It doesn't necessarily mean that you are having dinner or going on vacations together—but it can mean that, if that's what you want. Bottom line, each family has to come to a determination of what 'open' means and, even then, that will probably change as your child grows.” **AP**

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