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FACTSHEET FOR FAMILIES

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# Openness in Adoption: Building Relationships Between Adoptive and Birth Families









Open adoption allows adoptive parents, and often the adopted child, to interact with the child's birth parents. Openness can vary greatly from family to family and may change over time. Open adoption is becoming increasingly common, in part due to a growing recognition of the potential benefits of allowing an adopted child or youth to establish or maintain connections with his or her birth family. To support adoptive families in considering and

**What's Inside:**


- What is open adoption?
- Trends toward increasing openness
- Benefits of open adoption
- Deciding whether open adoption is right for your family
- Building and maintaining relationships with your child's birth family
- Using social media for contact with birth families


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**Child Welfare Information Gateway**
Children's Bureau/ACYF
1250 Maryland Avenue, SW
Eighth Floor
Washington, DC 20024
800.394.3366
Email: info@childwelfare.gov
**https://www.childwelfare.gov**

maintaining open adoption, this factsheet describes various levels of openness, potential benefits, important considerations, and tips for building and strengthening open relationships.[1]

## What Is Open Adoption?

Open adoption is a type of adoption in which birth and adoptive families have some form of initial and/or ongoing contact. Contact may begin with a meeting between an expectant mother and potential adoptive parents. Sometimes, an expectant parent may choose the adoptive family based on such a meeting or other communication. After placement, birth mothers and/or fathers and members of their extended families may interact in various ways with the adoptive parents, as well as with the adopted child or youth. Communication may happen through letters, emails, social media exchanges, telephone calls, or visits. While some families may exchange brief notes and photos, others may spend more time together and celebrate birthdays or holidays together. The type and frequency of contact will be decided by the people involved and can range from several times a month to every few years. Contact often changes as a child ages or as family members' needs and wishes change.

Parents have several options available related to openness. Some think of the options as a continuum, shown in the diagram on the next page. On one end of the continuum is a **confidential, or closed, adoption**. In this type of adoption, no contact occurs between birth and adoptive families and no identifying information is shared. (Some nonidentifying information, such as medical history, may be provided through an adoption agency or attorney.[2]) In the middle of the continuum, is a form of openness known as **semi-open or mediated adoption**. In a semi-open or mediated adoption, contact is made indirectly through a mediator, such as an agency caseworker or lawyer, or through an anonymous post office or email box. While letters, photos, and other information may be exchanged between the adoptive family and birth family, they do not share names and addresses. This type of adoption allows for communication, while also offering some privacy. On the far end of the continuum is an **open adoption**, also referred to as a fully disclosed adoption. In an open adoption, identities are known and there is direct contact between birth parents (and possibly other members of the birth families) and the adoptive families. Contact may be occasional or frequent, in person or remote, and may vary over time. An open adoption supports the development of relationships, particularly relationships between a child and his or her birth parents.

[1] While this factsheet includes information primarily for adoptive parents, it also may be of interest to birth parents. Pregnant women thinking about placing their child for adoption also may be interested in *Open Adoption: Could Open Adoption Be the Best Choice for You and Your Baby?* available from https://www.childwelfare.gov/adoption/birth/for/

[2] Each State has its own laws about the kinds of information that may be collected and shared with adopting parents. For more information, see *Collection of Family Information About Adopted Persons and Their Birth Families*, available from https://www.childwelfare.gov/systemwide/laws_policies/statutes/collection.cfm

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**Confidential Adoption**
- No contact
- No identifying information shared

**Semi-Open Adoption (Mediated)**
- Indirect contact
- Share nonidentifying information

**Open Adoption**
- Direct communication
- Exchange identifying information

As highlighted above, there are different forms of openness. It is important to emphasize, however, that even in a fully open adoption, **adoptive parents and birth parents do not parent their child together**. In all forms of adoption, the adoptive parents have the permanent legal rights and responsibilities for parenting and raising the child.

## Trends Toward Increasing Openness

For the past several generations, adoption was kept secret. The trend reflected common attitudes that children and birth mothers should be protected from the "stigma of illegitimacy." Most adopted children did not know their birth parents and often were not even told they were adopted until later in life. Some were never told. It was commonly believed that a lack of openness would make it easier for the birth parents, the adoptive parents, and the children to adapt. The sense of secrecy, however, left many children and youth, as well as their birth families, with unanswered questions and unable to resolve feelings of loss. It also left young people without access to valuable information about their genetic background and the medical history of their birth relatives. The surrounding secrecy often created a sense of shame.

Today, most adopted children and youth know that they are adopted, and many adoptive families have had some contact with birth families. A national study of adoptive families in the United States found that in approximately one-third of all adoptive families, the adoptive parents or the adopted child or youth had some contact with the birth family after the adoption. Postadoption contact occurred more often in private domestic adoption (68 percent) as compared with adoption from foster care (39 percent) and international adoption (6 percent).[3] A more recent study among U.S. adoption agencies reported that almost all (95 percent) of their domestic infant adoptions were open.[4]

Several factors have contributed to the increasing openness of adoption. Foremost, there is the growing awareness of the negative effects of secrecy and the benefits of openness for many adopted children and youth, birth parents, and adoptive parents (see below.) In recent years, more and more birth mothers have asked for openness and the ability to receive and share information

[3] Vandivere, S., Malm, K., & Radel, L. (2009). *Adoption USA: A Chartbook Based on the 2007 National Survey of Adoptive Parents*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation. Retrieved from http://aspe.hhs.gov/hsp/09/NSAP/chartbook

[4] Siegel, D., & Smith, S. L. (2012). *Openness in Adoption. From Secrecy and Stigma to Knowledge and Connections*. New York, NY: Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute. Retrieved from http://www.adoptioninstitute.org/research/2012_03_openness.php

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as a condition of an adoption. Additionally, responding to large numbers of adult adopted persons and birth parents who returned to adoption agencies to seek information about each other, States have changed their adoption laws, and agencies have added programs and services that support open adoption.

Today, another factor plays a part in pushing the trend toward openness—the Internet and social media. Increasing numbers of adopted persons and birth parents are finding each other with relative speed and little emotional preparation through social networking sites, such as Facebook. As a result, some adoptive and birth parents who initially chose a closed adoption are encountering experiences in which the adoption is later opened, but not always in ways that are agreeable to all parties or developmentally appropriate for the child. Choosing openness at the time of adoption may provide greater control over and preparation for the communication process as compared with more impromptu social media contacts.

## Benefits of Open Adoption

Adoption professionals and researchers[5] point to important benefits of open adoption for adopted children, birth parents, and adoptive parents. Since every adoption is different and the situations of the involved parties vary, these benefits may not apply to every adoption.

### Benefits for Adopted Children and Youth

Children and youth who have been adopted naturally have questions about their background and personal histories (Who am I? Who do I look like? Why was I adopted?). Through openness, adopted children and youth gain access to birth parents, and possibly grandparents and siblings, which removes the need to search and helps provide needed answers to compelling questions. Regular contact during childhood creates a base of familiarity and normalcy for adopted children so that they may connect more easily with their birth parents throughout their lives.

Open adoption allows adopted children and youth to:

- Establish a sense of connection and belonging
- Develop a deeper understanding of their identity and a greater sense of wholeness
- Gain access to important genetic and medical information
- Preserve connections not only to family but also to their cultural and ethnic heritage
- Develop a better understanding for the reasons for placement, which can lessen feelings of abandonment and increase a sense of belonging
- Relate to birth family members as real people with strengths and flaws rather

[5] See, for example, the research conducted under the Minnesota/Texas Adoption Research Project (http://www.psych.umass.edu/adoption/) and the review presented in *Openness in Adoption: From Secrecy and Stigma to Knowledge and Connections* (http://www.adoptioninstitute.org/research/2012_03_openness.php)

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than idealized (or overly negative) fantasies

- Increase the number of supportive adults in their lives
- Create a foundation for lifelong relationships

## Benefits for Birth Parents

While birth parents of a child placed for adoption may continue to feel loss and grief over the course of their lives, openness can help them deal with these powerful emotions. Openness from the earliest stages of the adoption process can help birth parents gain a sense of control over the decision-making related to placement of their child. Over time, openness also may help birth parents to:

- Gain peace of mind and comfort in knowing how their child is doing
- Develop personal relationships with the adoptive parents and the child as he or she grows
- Become more satisfied with the adoption process

## Benefits for Adoptive Parents

While openness is becoming a more common practice, many people seeking to adopt (as well as their families, friends, and co-workers) are not familiar with open adoption, and many maintain fears and false impressions of the concept. Once in an open adoption, however, most adoptive parents find a comfort level with their arrangements.

Open adoption often allows adoptive parents to:

- Build a healthy relationship with their child's birth family and provide lifelong connections for their child
- Gain direct access to birth family members who can answer their child's questions
- Improve their understanding of their child's history
- Develop more positive attitudes about their child's birth parents
- Increase their confidence and sense of permanency in parenting

## Openness Is Not for Everyone

In some cases, ongoing contact between a birth and adoptive family is not in a child's best interest. This may be true when a parent has mental or behavioral issues and is unable to maintain a healthy relationship or respect appropriate boundaries with a child. In some instances, contact might result in additional trauma for a child who has already been victimized by abuse or neglect.

In addition, some parents are comfortable only with closed adoption. For example, a birth mother may have strong needs for privacy or may feel that confidentiality will help her to move on with her life. Adoptive parents may have concerns over interacting with the birth family or may want to have greater control over the information that their child receives.

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# Deciding Whether Open Adoption Is Right for Your Family

There is no one type of adoption or single arrangement that is right for everyone. Every adoption is unique and every family has its own set of circumstances. Important questions to consider and resources to help think through related issues are discussed below.

## Questions to Consider

In exploring open adoption, it is important to thoroughly consider what is best for your child and family and to think not just about current needs and preferences but also those that may emerge in the future. For an adoption to be truly open, the relationship with the birth family must be shared with the adopted child. As such, an adoptive parent must consider how and when this relationship will be shared with the child or youth and how it may change as the child gets older.

Some of the questions that adoptive parents may want to consider include:

- What would contact between our family and our child's birth family mean to our child?
- Do I want my child to know about his or her family background and related information?
- What forms of communication (letters, emails, videos, Facebook, phone calls, visits) am I comfortable with?
- At what age should our child be included in contact with his or her birth family?
- What role will our child's birth parents (and/or other birth relatives) play in our child's life?
- How will openness with one child's birth family affect adopted siblings who have different levels of openness in their adoptions?
- How will we react if we choose a closed adoption and our child and birth parents later establish contact through social media or other avenues?

## Resources to Help Explore Open Adoption

Adoptive parents can gain a better understanding of openness by:

- Talking with professionals who handle adoption
- Meeting with a counselor or therapist with knowledge and experience in open adoption (see Child Welfare Information Gateway's *Selecting and Working With a Therapist Skilled in Adoption*, available from https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f_therapist.pdf)
- Exploring the Internet, including websites that provide information and research as well as blogs that relay personal experiences (see the resource list on at the end of this factsheet)
- Reading articles and books about open adoption (see abstracts listed under Library Search, Child Welfare Information Gateway, https://www.childwelfare.gov/adoption/birth/for/connections.cfm)

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### Common Openness Fears and Myths (and What the Research Says)[6]

**Myth:** *Adopted children will become confused about who their "real parents" are and suffer identify issues.*

**Reality:** Adopted children and youth are *not* confused about who their parents are. They understand the different roles adoptive and birth parents play in their lives. They recognize who gave them life and who cares for them on a daily basis. Open relationships and conversations about adoption often help strengthen the adopted youth's sense of identity.

**Myth:** *Birth parents will try to "reclaim" their children.*

**Reality:** There is no evidence that birth mothers try to take back their children in an open adoption. In some studies, ongoing contact with birth parents has led to increased comfort levels and helped adoptive parents ease such fears. (It is important to remember that birth parents have terminated parental rights and can't decide after several years to take back their children.)

**Myth:** *Birth parents will interfere in the adoptive families' lives, and parents will be confused about their rights and responsibilities.*

**Reality:** Participants in open adoption are generally *not* confused about their parenting rights and responsibilities. In fact, some adoptive parents in open relationships report feeling a greater sense of entitlement to parent their adopted child.

**Myth:** *Birth mothers in open adoption will have more problems with feelings of grief and loss.*

**Reality:** Many birth mothers are able to deal with their grief, loss, and sadness better in open adoption than in closed adoption.

## Building and Maintaining Relationships With Your Child's Birth Family

Making an open adoption work requires commitment to ongoing relationships, despite their ups and downs. While adoptive family and birth family relationships may seem awkward at first, over time the involved individuals typically become more comfortable. Some people compare the experience to working out other extended family relationships, such as relationships with new in-laws or with a child's stepfamily following a divorce and remarriage. While some adoptive and birth families arrange openness informally, others will develop more formal agreements. When challenges arise, some families use mediation or other support for help.

### Setting Common Expectations With Postadoption Contact Agreements

Postadoption contact agreements, sometimes called open adoption agreements, are formal arrangements between a child's adoptive family and members of the child's birth family (or other persons with whom the child has an established relationship, such as a foster parent). These agreements, typically signed prior to finalization of an adoption, describe *how* (letters, emails, visits, etc.) and

[6] Findings are based on the work of the Minnesota/Texas Adoption Research Project. For more information, see http://www.psych.umass.edu/adoption/key_findings/

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*how often* communication will take place following an adoption.

Postadoption agreements can help make sure that everyone has a shared understanding of the expectations for openness. It is important to know, however, that these agreements are not always enforceable. About 26 States have laws that allow for written and enforceable contact agreements. The conditions and rules related to establishing and enforcing contracts vary across these States.[7] In no State can disputes over the postadoption agreements be used as grounds for terminating an adoption or changing adoptive parents' parental rights.

## Strengthening Relationships

To build healthy relationships between adoptive and birth families, adoption professionals emphasize the following:

- **Stay focused on what is in the best interests of the child,** which may not always be the same as the preferences of the birth and adoptive parents.
- **Show respect** for and acceptance of the other family members.
- **Set clear boundaries** of what is and what is not acceptable in terms of contact and communication, and respect the limits requested by the other parties.
- **Maintain open communication** that reflects a genuine commitment to maintaining connection.
- **Be flexible** and recognize that needs may change over time.

[7] For more information, see *Postadoption Contact Agreements* between Birth and Adoptive Families, available online at https://www.childwelfare.gov/systemwide/laws_policies/statutes/cooperative.cfm

Open adoption relationships, like all relationships, change and evolve as the individuals involved reach different stages in their lives. Communication and contact may increase or decrease at different times, reflecting varying needs, interests, and life situations of the children and youth who have been adopted, birth parents, and adoptive families. For example, adopted youth may discover new questions and show more interest in spending time with birth relatives as teenagers than they did when they were younger. Birth parents or adoptive parents may have more time to spend with each other at certain times and less at others (e.g., after birth or adoption of another child). Some may move away to a different geographic area, and some may just need time to themselves. It is important that adoptive and birth parents let each other know when they need to change the frequency or form of contact. A sudden, unexpected drop in contact can have negative consequences, particularly for the adopted child or youth who may not understand the surrounding circumstances. Adoptive parents may need to help their children understand the behavior of their birth parents at those times when it is disappointing or hurtful.

## Addressing Challenges With Mediation

Sometimes families need help with establishing relationships, overcoming differences on how and when contact should occur, or navigating changes in the relationships. Mediation—which refers to meeting with a neutral third party such as an agency or adoption professional—can sometimes be helpful. Mediators can help develop written agreements before an

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adoption or aid in sorting out changing needs and roles later in the adoption.

## Using Social Media for Contact With Birth Families

Social media, which includes various forms of communication conducted via the Internet, is dramatically changing the ways in which people connect and converse. It also is emerging as a significant factor in adoption openness. While exact numbers are not known, anecdotal evidence suggests that increasing numbers of adopted people and their birth families are finding each other through social networking sites, such as Facebook. In adoptions that are already open, social media is creating new questions for adoptive and birth parents. For example, adoptive parents may wonder if they should "friend" their child's adoptive birth parent on Facebook or other social networks. Will they be comfortable if their child's birth mother reads their blogs with stories of the adoption journey?

### Using Social Media in Search and Reunion

Among the benefits of using social networking sites and other forms of social media as an aid in search and reunion efforts is that they can connect adopted people and members of their birth family fairly quickly, free of charge, and without the need for an intermediary. These same benefits, however, also have downsides. For example, connections are being made between adopted people and their birth families without the benefit of important support systems. Also, online contact may occur with a preteen or child before the young person is developmentally ready. Sometimes adoptive parents find out about connections after the fact, and they may become upset or angry. If the adoption has been closed, adoptive parents may be fearful that their child is in contact with another adult they do not know.

Adoption professionals strongly recommend emotional preparation before search and reunion. These events can be enormously emotional and may tap into strong feelings of separation and loss. Preparation will help adopted children and youth, and their families, to think through their expectations and prepare for a range of potential reactions, including rejection. In addition, professionals encourage birth relatives to gradually make contacts and get to know each other slowly.[8] While instant messages and swift replies are commonplace in social media, they are often not the best route for early communication with a birth relative, which instead benefits from slow and carefully considered responses.

With many youth commonly spending unsupervised time on the Internet, contacts between an adopted youth and his or her birth family members are sometimes taking place without the consent, or knowledge, of the adoptive parents. Teens may worry that their adoptive parents will feel betrayed by their search or will not understand their need to find out more about where they come from. It is important that adoptive parents prepare for the potential of social

[8] For more information, see Child Welfare Information Gateway's *Searching for Birth Relatives*, available at https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f_search.cfm

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media connections by talking with their children about their adoption and providing guidance on the use of social media. The box below offers some tips.[9]

### ADOPTED YOUTH AND SOCIAL MEDIA: TIPS FOR ADOPTIVE PARENTS

- Talk with your child about adoption and birth family connections and answer his or her questions.
- Present options for learning more about birth relatives, when the child is interested, and emphasize the benefits of preparation and support.
- Discuss the benefits and risks of Facebook and other social networking sites, and provide guidance for safe use.
- Establish Internet rules at an early age (such as not giving out identifying information, including a birth date, address, or phone number).
- Prepare your child for the possibility that a birth family member could contact him or her through social media, and discuss possible responses.
- Set privacy controls.
- Monitor your child's Internet and social networking use (join the same social media networks as your child, become your child's online "friend," and request passwords for their social media accounts).

If adoptive parents discover that contact between their child and a birth relative has already been made via social media, they should become involved in the relationship and set boundaries, as needed. One strategy is for adults to align—to reach out parent to parent—and make decisions together about future contact.

## Using Social Media to Communicate in an Open Relationship

Within established relationships, social media offers easily accessible avenues for sharing information. As a result, birth parents can receive real-time updates on their child, while youth can find out more about their family connections. Online forums can help individuals stay connected even at remote distances.

Adoptive families are advised, however, to proceed cautiously when using social media for communicating in open or semi-open adoption relationships. It is important, particularly in new relationships, to share information slowly and build trust over time. Parents should consider their comfort levels for opening access to the information on their profiles, walls, and posts. Online comments can be easily misunderstood. What might be appropriate for close friends or neighbors might be misunderstood by birth family members at a distance. In particular, comments related to the adoption process or parenting may be misinterpreted or could potentially make birth family members uncomfortable. Similarly, some information on a birth relative's site may be uncomfortable for an adoptive family or adopted child to read. In addition, some parents feel uneasy seeing their child's picture posted.

[9] For additional information, see Adoption Star. (2012). *Adoption and Social Media. The Effects of Social Media and the Internet on Child Adoption*, available at http://www.adoptionstar.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/08/Social-Media-and-Adoption-Adoption-STAR.pdf

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### TIPS FOR USING SOCIAL MEDIA FOR COMMUNICATION IN OPEN RELATIONSHIPS

To set the groundwork for using social media to communicate, adoptive and birth parents should:

- Talk with each other about their comfort levels in sharing information and photos via social media.
- Decide which social media tools are appropriate for communication (Facebook, Twitter, email, etc.) and with what privacy settings.
- Set boundaries upfront (for example, not commenting on one another's walls, if that is important).
- Before posting anything, think carefully about how it may be received by all who might see it.

Some adoptive and birth parents find it useful to create separate Facebook pages or private password-protected websites or blogs for contact between adoptive and birth families. This takes the relationship out of the public arena and allows for controlled access to information and photos. Others enjoy openly sharing information on established networks. Regardless of the forums selected, parents should use the same care in online communication as they would in face-to-face contact to make sure that it is appropriate and respectful to all potential viewers.

### Using Social Media to Communicate in Intercountry Adoption

With its ability to bridge great distances, social media is being used increasingly to connect birth families, adoptive families, and their children who have been adopted through intercountry adoption. These include children adopted into the Unites States from foreign countries as well as U.S. children and youth who have been adopted by families in other countries. Outgoing adoption often involves open relationships. Individuals using social media for international contact may face additional challenges, including cultural differences and varying perspectives of adoption.

## Conclusion

Openness in adoption can provide a child or youth with valuable connections to his or her past. No single open arrangement, however, is right for everyone. As with any relationship, there may be bumps and challenges along the way in the relationships between birth and adoptive families. Moreover, these relationships are likely to evolve and change over time. Through careful consideration of options, a clear child-focused approach, and a strong commitment to making it work, you can decide what level of openness is right for your family.

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## Resources for More Information

Adoptive Families Magazine
http://www.adoptivefamilies.com/openadoption.php

American Adoption Congress
http://www.americanadoptioncongress.org/open_adoption.php

Child Welfare Information Gateway
https://www.childwelfare.gov/adoption/adoptive/openness.cfm

https://www.childwelfare.gov/adoption/birth/for/connections.cfm

Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute
http://www.adoptioninstitute.org/publications/#openadoption

Insight: Open Adoption Resources and Support
http://www.openadoptioninsight.org

Minnesota/Texas Adoption Research Project (MTARP)
http://www.psych.umass.edu/adoption/

Open Adoption Bloggers
http://www.productionnotreproduction.com/p/open-adoption-blogs.html

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