

# Open Adoption and Adolescence

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## ABSTRACT

In open adoptions, birth and adoptive families exchange identifying information and have contact. Although most adoptions today include some form of openness, much of the public remains wary of this. The purpose of this study was to explore, longitudinally, adoptive parents' perceptions of their children's open adoptions. This article reports the findings of tape-recorded interviews with 31 adoptive parents who were first interviewed when their children were infants and toddlers, again 7 years later, and a third time when their children were adolescents. The study found adoptive parents were committed to maintaining contact with the birth family even when discomforts and challenges in the relationships occurred. These findings can be used to guide agency policies and clinical practices that enable a wide range of open adoption options.

The past two decades have revolutionized social work practice in adoption (National Adoption Information Clearinghouse, 2003; Pertman, 2000). The secrecy and cutoffs that characterized adoption in the United States from the 1940s through the 1980s are no longer the norm (Carp, 2002; Fravel, McRoy, & Grotevant, 2000; Grotevant & McRoy, 1998; Henney, McRoy, Ayers-Lopez, & Grotevant, 2003; Rosenberg & Groze, 1997; Shireman, 2003; Wrobel, Grotevant, Berge, Mendenhall, & McRoy, 2003). Although the literature initially conveyed concerns that open adoption was a mistake (Kraft, Palombo, Mitchell, et al., 1985, 1986; Kraft, Palombo, Woods, Mitchell, & Schmidt, 1985a, 1985b), some kind of contact and exchange of information between birth and adoptive families are now considered best practice (Reamer & Siegel, 2007; Siegel, 1998; Siegel, 2006).

Nonetheless, public opinion toward openness in adoption remains somewhat wary (Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute, 1997, 2002; Miall & March, 2005; Wegar, 2000).

Even among adoption professionals, beliefs and assumptions about what constitutes sound, just adoption practice vary (Brodzinsky, Smith, & Brodzinsky, 1998; Gritter, 2000; Gross, 1993, 1997; Martin, 1998; Melina & Roszia, 1993; Melosh, 2002; Modell, 2002; Seader & Pierce, 2000; Siegel, 1993, 2003; Smith & Howard, 1999). Some open adoptions involve minimal exchange of information and contact, whereas others involve frequent interaction. While a growing research literature shows the viability of different open adoption arrangements (Berry, Dylla, Barth, & Needell, 1998; Grotevant, 2001; Grotevant, Perry, & McRoy, 2005; Siegel, 2003; Berry, 1998; Grotevant & McRoy, 1997, 1998; Grotevant, McRoy, Elde, & Fravel, 1994; Melina & Roszia, 1993; Siegel, 2003), more systematic, empirical exploration of open adoption processes and outcomes is needed to inform public policy and social work practice (Berry, 1991; Grotevant, 2000a, 2000b; National Adoption Information Clearinghouse, 2003).

Given the methodological challenges embedded in conducting research on complex, varied, evolving, experiential phenomena such as open adoption, the body of empirically based knowledge from different studies is growing slowly. Studies differ in how they define open adoption, questions asked, and tools used. Nonrandom availability sampling methods must be used because there is no comprehensive list of families with open adoptions. Two large longitudinal studies (Berry et al., 1998; Kohler et al., 2002; Mendenhall, Berge, Wrobel, Grotevant, & McRoy, 2004; Regents, 2005) have begun to explore who participates in and controls decision-making processes in open adoptions; types of openness; changes in contact over time; adoptive parents' expectations about how openness will affect the child; adoptive family dynamics; and possible associations between level of openness and adoptee self-esteem, curiosity and preoccupation with adoption, and satisfaction with level of contact.

It is crucial, given how quickly some type of openness in adoption has become the norm, that we closely monitor how people in different research samples respond to their very different open adoption experiences over the life span. We must continually update and reassess existing knowledge about open adoption so practice and policy are based on research findings that hold up consistently across studies. The longitudinal research reported in this article contributes to understanding the extent to which different studies paint a consistent picture of the open adoption experience from adoptive parents' perspectives. Because it is not possible to generate a random sample of families with open adoptions social workers must rely on a slowly growing body of information from different studies with nonprobability samples.

This article reports on the third phase of a longitudinal study (Siegel, 1993, 2003) begun in the late 1980s, early in the open adoption movement. The original sample consisted of 21 families who had recently adopted an infant in an open adoption, defined as "the birth parent(s) and adoptive parent(s) share with each other some sort of personal contact before and/or after the adoption takes place" (Siegel, 1993, p. 17). These parents were reinterviewed 7 years later, to reassess their open adoption experiences (Siegel, 2003). The findings reported in the present article are from a third round of interviews, conducted while the children were adolescents. This study's overarching purpose was to learn, from adoptive parents' points of view, how open adoptions evolved over time; the perceived advantages and disadvantages of openness; parents' fears, anxieties, and unanswered questions about open adoption; their advice for others contemplating or living in open adoption; and their advice for social workers involved in adoption.

In brief, the Phase 1 interviews showed a wide variety of different open adoption arrangements, ranging from an

anonymous exchange of letters via an adoption agency; to a one-time, face-to-face preplacement meeting when identifying information was disclosed; to birth and adoptive family members visiting each other repeatedly after the adoption was finalized. All of the respondents at Phase 1 and Phase 2 agreed that open adoption worked well for them and had only positive effects on their children (Siegel, 2003).

Phase 2 findings revealed that contact between birth and adoptive families varied over time, along three dimensions—type of contact (i.e., face-to-face, telephone, e-mail, letter), frequency, and participants (i.e., birth parent or other birth family member or friend). Some of the families reported their children's birth parents had drifted in and out of touch. Other families reported having more frequent contact or more face-to-face contact than at Phase 1.

When the families were interviewed a third time, 14 years after the first interview, the same questions were asked, with two additions: (1) What is it like for you to have an adolescent in an open adoption? (2) What do you think it's like for your child to be in an open adoption as a teenager?

## Method

The study's research methods and the findings of the first two phases have been reported in detail elsewhere (Siegel, 1993, 2003). When the study began in 1988, 42 adoptive parents throughout New England, located using a snowball sampling method, agreed to be interviewed. These same parents were recontacted 7 years later, when their children were between the ages of 7 and 9, to discern what, if anything, remained open in the adoptions and how the openness had worked out for them thus far. The third phase of the study, reported here, took place 14 years after the initial interview. Thus, the 31 parents who could be located were reinterviewed when the children in the initial sample had reached adolescence. This longitudinal design offers a valuable opportunity to explore changes over the child-rearing years. Inevitably, during the 14 years of the study there was some sample mortality: at Phase 1, there were 21 interviews of 42 parents; at Phase 2, there were 16 interviews of 32 parents; and at Phase 3, there were 20 interviews of 31 parents.

## Findings

### *Changes in the Families*

Predictably, the families had weathered many changes since the Phase 2 interview. Although the interview was not designed to elicit this information, the respondents reported major life events, including the adoption of a third ( $N = 1$ ) or fourth child ( $N = 1$ ); an adoption disruption; divorce ( $N = 7$ ) and remarriage ( $N = 2$ ); deaths of

grandparents; unemployment; financial struggles; parental physical disabilities and mental health struggles; and adolescent adoptees' substance use, academic underperformance, learning disabilities, mental health issues, noncompliance with family rules, and involvement in the juvenile justice system. Thus, even though the interviews were structured to focus solely on issues related to open adoption these other life events and struggles came forth in response to the first set of interview questions, "How many children do you have now? Have they entered your family through birth, adoption, remarriage, or other ways? If you have adopted other children since our last interview, what, if anything, is open about those adoptions?" These questions elicited much information having little or nothing to do with adoption or additions to the family. The comment of one divorced adoptive mother was typical: "We don't have much to tell you [about open adoption] .... Adoption isn't really the issue. It's really just growing up, marriages, schools, what everybody goes through." Her ex-husband, also present at the interview, added, "Life in general has a way of overwhelming everything .... Adoption gets subsumed and ceases to be a factor after a while."

At Phase 1, all respondents shared their stories of struggle with infertility and the complexities involved in making an adoption happen; the openness in the adoptions took a backstage to general adoption themes, such as the challenges of finding a child to adopt. At Phase 3, consistent with Phase 2 results, the parents' stories were primarily about coping with a broad range of life events. Adoption issues in general, and open adoption in particular, did not emerge as major preoccupations in these families, despite the researcher's continually refocusing the interviews on the research questions involving open adoption.

### ***Changes in Openness***

Several interview questions dealt with current openness compared with the openness of 7 years ago: "In what ways, if any, has the type and amount of openness in the adoption changed in the 7 years since our last interview?" The responses yielded a picture of diversity similar to the one that emerged at Phase 2; that is, the adoptions varied tremendously in how the openness had changed and the reasons the parents gave for those changes. Families varied in how much contact they had with birth parents or other birth family members, the type of contact, and the participants in the contact. In many families, open adoption arrangements changed from year to year. Thirteen of the families reported having face-to-face contact with a birth family member at least once during the previous 7 years. In no instance, as before, did an adoptive parent say that she or he had sought less contact; during phases when contact with the birth family waned, adoptive parents said

that was due to a birth parent dropping out of touch or not responding to overtures from the adoptive family. One adoptive mother, who had initially exchanged letters with birth family members several times a year, reported:

Now I write and send photos once a year, as I do for everyone in my family, and we don't hear anything back from the birth mother [or her family] at all. I just keep doing it, to make sure there still is a door open if our children ever need or want them, so there won't have been a long void and it'll be easier for everyone.

Three other adoptive families who also no longer received mail or phone calls from the birth family reported they were open to contact in the future but did not pursue it at this time. One of these fathers noted, "It's not really an open adoption any more. We have no contact." His wife added, "That's okay. For now it just works the way it is."

One family reported having lost touch with a birth parent during the previous 7 years, but having continued contact with other birth family members. Other families reported having more frequent visits than before. In situations in which contact had increased, the change had been mutual, in all instances initiated by the adoptive family. Several reported their teenage child had e-mail contact with the birth mother; in no instance did the adoptive parents routinely monitor the exchange of e-mail messages, although one adoptive father said he would check the messages if he felt there was a reason to do so. The children in all of the families knew their parents received mail from the birth family, but in two families the parents did not share correspondence with the child or tell them when a letter arrived.

It is not possible to report the exact numbers of families correlated to each type of contact, frequency of contact, or which family members participated in the contact because within the 7-year time period covered in the Phase 3 interviews individual families changed along these dimensions. All of the respondents reported continuing to feel comfortable with whatever form of contact they had. The only discomfort expressed was by parents who wished the birth family would be in touch more often. Just as at Phases 1 and 2, at Phase 3 families who had more than one adoption all stated they preferred the adoption with the greater degree of contact and access to information.

### ***Adolescence and Open Adoption***

When asked about the intersection of adolescence and open adoption, every respondent indicated that while there were normal, predictable adolescent and adoption issues to contend with from time to time, openness was

not a concern for either the parents or their teenagers. No parent felt that openness in the adoption exacerbated any of the challenges confronting the family as they grappled with adolescence and adoption issues. No one felt openness in the adoption, in and of itself, complicated life in

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troubling or bothersome ways. According to one mother, "It's adolescent issues, not adoption issues."

A father said, "It's been a stormy adolescence but I don't hang any of that on open adoption." A mother, whose family also visited with the birth family, remarked, "That open adoption can make adolescence worse is a myth, I think."

Some parents surmised that adoption themes might enhance typical adolescent identity concerns, but none saw these issues aggravated by the openness in the adoptions. To the contrary, they all saw openness as a benefit to the child dealing with identity issues with which a teenager must grapple. A mother commented,

The normal "who am I" issues of adolescence are compounded by adoption "who am I" issues. But because of open adoption he has always known who he is, [who his birth parents are, his genetic heritage, the reasons for his adoption]; hopefully, this has alleviated some of the compounded difficulty adoptees in closed adoptions have. He has those answers in place. His bewilderment is less intense. Adoption is less of an issue during adolescence when there is openness than when it's closed.

According to another mother, whose household had annual visits with many birth family members, "Having an adolescent eclipses open adoption. Open adoption is kind of a nonissue. Being a teenager is the issue." She, too, felt that openness was only an advantage to the child, as did a father who said, "I see only benefits to open adoption, no down sides to it."

Without exception, the respondents reported feeling matter-of-fact about openness, taking it in stride as a given, a fact of life that, if anything, made things easier

for the family. This was true for families that had recent face-to-face visits with birth family members, as well as families who had stayed in touch only via e-mail, phone, or letters. In the words of one adoptive father, whose household visited with the birth family two or three times a year, "They are family. It's a very comfortable relationship. Nothing [about the visits feels] strange. It doesn't feel weird, like you have someone else's child; that doesn't enter the picture at all."

No child had run away to the birth family. According to the respondents, no birth parent had intruded in or threatened the adoptive family's life or competed with the adoptive parents for the child's affections. An adoptive mother, whose family had visits several times a year with the birth family, mused,

In 2 years, when our son has his driver's license and more freedom and mobility, I know anything can happen. He's bonded to us. I don't picture him saying, "I've had enough of this adoptive family. I'm going to see if I can live with my real mother." Things do happen. You can't tell. But I'm not worried about it.

Even in a family in which the child, without the adoptive parents' advance knowledge, explored the possibility of living with the birth family, the adoptive parents were unconcerned:

When we were visiting with his birth mother, our son said to us, "I want to talk to Sue [the birth mother] alone." We said, "Of course." After he and Sue talked, Sue told us that he'd asked her if he could live with her. And she said she made it very clear to him that we are his parents, we are all family, and yes, he can come visit, but he cannot come and live with her. His birth mother is clear about the boundaries and roles.

***Issues and Challenges Arising From Contact***

While all of the respondents expressed positive feelings about having an open adoption, all interviews yielded issues and challenges involved in living with openness. Parents saw these as inherent in any family and human relationship, rather than as reasons not to have contact with birth family members. In one father's words, "When bumps in the road occur [in the adoptive and birth families' relationships with each other], folks just deal with them, as they deal with all issues in life."

For instance, one couple described an incident in which the birth mother agreed to come for a visit and then failed to show up. The adoptive mother said,

She lied to us. She called us throughout the weekend to say she was getting on the train and to meet her at

the station. Three times we drove to the station and she wasn't there. It was upsetting. I told her afterwards that I felt angry that she'd set up our hopes and then didn't follow through. She said she was insulted that I didn't believe her. I let it go for a while, and after a time we resumed [writing] letters [to each other], and we acted as if the rift had never happened. My daughter didn't say much about it; she just took the incident in stride.

When asked why, after this upsetting incident, these adoptive parents resumed the contact, they said, "Stuff happens in families. Conflict is predictable. That's not a reason to lock important people out of one's life."

When the researcher probed for how this incident may have affected the child, the parents said,

Our daughter may have issues to work out with her [birth mother] later. For now, [our daughter] can count on us to do what we say; she has experienced one of the reasons her adoption was necessary. If the birth mother's life were real functional, she wouldn't have needed to make an adoption plan; her life is complicated and difficult. Why stay mad at her about that, when that's what made it possible for us to be this child's parents?

Two other families also experienced difficult issues around a visit. One family put their 14-year-old daughter on a plane to fly alone to another state to visit her birth mother, unaccompanied by an adoptive parent or adoptive family member. According to the adoptive mother, divorced from the adoptive father and interviewed separately, the daughter returned from that 2-week visit visibly distraught over leaving her birth family behind. The adoptive father, when interviewed, had a very different interpretation of events. He said, "Our daughter was having a hard time before the visit, dealing with her AD/HD and depression, our divorce and my remarriage, moving from middle school to high school. Her distress didn't have to do with the visit."

Neither saw the visit as a mistake or wished that they had not allowed it or had handled it differently.

A second divorced couple, also interviewed separately, had a similar disagreement about the impact a visit had on their child. The birth mother and her infant son visited in the adoptive mother's home for a week one summer. When they left, the 14-year-old adoptee increased her alcohol consumption. The adoptive mother felt the visit may have brought up feelings that her daughter was self-medicating with alcohol. The adoptive father disagreed, saying that the child had been drinking before the visit and that there was no obvious evidence that

the visit, or the way it had been handled, had been a mistake. The adoptive mother, on the other hand, mused that in retrospect she would have asked her daughter if she wanted the visit, instead of simply telling her the visit was going to occur. This mother said, "That would have given her and me an opportunity to think ahead to feelings she might have, to talk about her hopes, expectations, and anxieties about the visit, so she would have been more prepared to manage feelings that arose from the visit."

One adoptive mother described seeing her son and his birth mother sitting together on her son's bed, pouring over a birth family photo album together. Watching them, she felt painfully excluded. She reported,

But later, after his birth mom left, my son took my hand and said, "Mom, let's go for a walk." That was his way of saying to me, "It's okay, Mom. You're still my mother. I still love you in a special way." I felt completely better after that. There is no reason for me to feel threatened.

Another adoptive family drove across several state lines one summer to vacation with each birth parent and their respective children and spouses. On returning home, the adolescent adoptee, an only child in the adoptive family, said he missed his biological siblings. So the following Christmas, the adoptive parents invited the siblings to stay with them, which they did. These adoptive parents felt that it is only natural to miss one's siblings and did not see those feelings as reason to avoid contact.

Clearly, the above families handled and responded to visits differently. What they shared in common was a commitment to staying in touch and continuing the contact even when uncomfortable issues arose.

One couple reported distress arose from a letter their son had written to the birth mother's mother to ask about his ethnic background. The information arrived shortly after September 11, 2001. The child's birth father was Saudi Arabian. According to the adoptive parents, this information upset their son. Instead of regretting his son's access to this information, the adoptive father said of this incident, "Knowledge is a lot more powerful than the pain that might come from knowing it." The mother said, "I am an adoptee from a closed adoption. Not knowing about one's origins is a painful burden. My child has a fundamental human right to know."

This couple, like the rest of the sample, said that facts, however painful, are preferable to not knowing. In one adoptive father's words, "We've told our children everything we know about their birth families. The children's contact with their birth parents validates that this is what it is."

### **Secrets in Open Adoption**

Keeping secrets was another issue that emerged in several interviews. Although all of the respondents said they favor open over traditional confidential adoption because they do not believe in keeping secrets in the family, several parents spoke of withholding potentially disturbing information from their children.

For example, one couple had not disclosed to their daughter that her birth mother, shortly after the birth, had written the baby a letter stating the adoption decision was a mistake. The couple said someday they would share this with their daughter, but didn't want to burden her yet with that information. They still hoped, nonetheless, that someday soon the birth mother, who had declined to have ongoing contact with the family, would be willing to share phone calls, letters, or face-to-face visits with the family.

One birth mother had never told her own mother about the pregnancy and birth. The adoptive parents of this woman's child had not told their child about this. They didn't want him to feel burdened with keeping the secret when his birth family came to visit: "We don't want him to be the one to disclose his birth mother's private information, and we don't want him to have to carry the secret. So we just don't tell him the secret."

A third family had chosen not to let their daughter know that she was conceived by rape: "We see no compelling reason to burden our child with this information." Similarly, one couple reported not telling their child that she has biological siblings. They felt this information would be disturbing.

A fourth couple did not tell the birth mother they had divorced until 2 years after the fact. The birth mother's impending visit stimulated them to share that information with her so she would not be shocked when she arrived.

### **Other Differences Among Families**

Adoptive parents also differed with regard to whether and when to pursue, and how assertively to pursue birth parents who dropped out of sight. Some couples decided not to try to locate birth parents who disappeared. Others saw it as their parental responsibility to keep abreast of the birth parents' whereabouts, so that if the child needed contact, it would be more easily available. Three families in the sample who no longer knew how to get in touch with a birth parent planned to reconnect with the birth family after their child turned 18, if the child expressed that desire. Other parents felt no need to wait until age 18. They said they would seek out a birth family member when their child indicated a need for that.

Families differed in other ways as well. For instance, one adoptive mother reported declining the birth father's offer to set up a college trust fund for the child. She felt that "paying for college is a parent's responsibility. It was sweet

of him to offer, but I wouldn't want him to do it because it's not his job." However, another adoptive mother, widowed and not remarried, readily accepted the birth mother's offer to set aside money for the child's college education.

Another difference among families was that one adoptive parent planned a visit with the child's birth family without first asking the child if she wanted a visit. Other parents asked the child before proceeding. All parents who had visits reported the child participated readily in the visit and appeared to enjoy it. Similarly, some parents reported initiating comments about the birth family. Two, on the other hand, reported waiting for the child to ask questions. These latter two families had the least open adoptions in the sample. One had received an annual holiday card from a birth family friend for several years, but had lost touch with them. The other received an annual holiday letter from the birth mother, but had not shared the letters with the child.

These differences show the variety of ways parents in open adoption handle adoption issues. Just as there is no one type of open adoption arrangement, no one way of handling adoption issues characterizes the families in this study.

### **Others' Reactions**

The researcher in Phase 3 asked, "How do your extended family and friends react to the open adoption?" Most of the couples reported that any initial misgivings had given way over time to comfort and acceptance as families and friends saw that contact worked. One father said,

Once we visited a number of times and our family and friends had a chance to meet the birth family ... initial fear dissipated. Open adoption was unknown and unfamiliar, so scary. Once folks experienced open adoption, their fear went away."

One mother observed, "[When] we meet [people] who express discomfort with our open adoption, [I can see that they] are threatened by the reality that the birth parents exist at all."

### **Adoptive Parents' Advice**

The parents were also asked, "What advice do you have for others (birth mothers, birth fathers, birth family members, adoptive mothers, adoptive fathers) who are thinking about participating in an open adoption?" and "What advice do you have for social workers about how they can help others (birth parents and adoptive parents) in open adoptions?" Many suggestions emerged:

Recognize that an open adoption relationship, like any other relationship, evolves over time.

Remember that it's a very complicated set of relationships. You are connected to a person you don't know well at first, or don't like. So you feel vulnerable. From the beginning there needs to be an understanding that ... it's going to take time for us to know each other well. So you trust in people's good intentions. And I think there needs to be help along the way ... from adoption professionals with a lot of experience with this. Unfortunately, it's hard to find helpers with that knowledge and expertise.

Adoptive parents need to examine our own feelings and be willing to separate our fears from our child's needs. That takes courage.

When asked about advice, some parents mused that perhaps it helped that the birth parents did not live next door: "A little geographic distance helps maintain boundaries." Some respondents thought that perhaps contact with birth parents might not be a good idea if the birth parent had a mental illness or substance abuse problem. However, none of the adoptive parents whose children had birth parents with these struggles in their lives felt that mental health or substance abuse issues made openness a bad idea, since the birth parents did not engage in threatening behaviors during contact. None of these parents advised that the door on contact be closed simply because of mental health and substance abuse issues in the birth parents' lives.

### Limitations

Findings from this nonrandom sample, like the findings from other studies of adoptive families with adolescents in open adoption (Berry et al., 1998; Grotevant et al., 2005), cannot be generalized and must be interpreted with caution. Perhaps parents who agreed to participate in this study, and who could be located three times over 14 years, are different from parents in general who have children in open adoption. Self-selection, researcher bias, sample mortality, and socially desirable response bias are all possible threats to reliability and validity.

### Discussion

The findings are consistent with other studies, which have shown that most adoptive parents are comfortable with openness in their children's adoptions. Those who have discomfort about the amount of contact tend to want more, not less. Anxieties about openness subside over time with experience. Adolescents and their families find ways to navigate the complex relationship challenges that evolve over time in open adoptions (Grotevant et al., 2005; Berry et al., 1998).

This study contributes to knowledge of specific challenges and struggles families may experience during adolescence in open adoption. The road is not always smooth. Yet the families in this study, like those in other research, continue to see openness as an advantage to them. Thus, this study contributes to the growing body of research indicating that open adoptions can work well for the participants (Mendenhall et al., 2004; Sobol, Daly, & Kelloway, 2000). Social workers can use the accumulating research knowledge to ease public uneasiness about open adoption.

This study, like previously published research, shows that different families manage open adoption differently and that openness in any one family may change over time. The social work profession's commitments to the *Code of Ethics of the National Association of Social Workers* (NASW, 1999), diversity, and client empowerment challenge administrators and direct service providers to develop laws, policies, and clinical practice approaches that respect and accept each family's choices about how to handle adoption issues. Simultaneously, social workers also know about the deleterious effects secrecy and cutoffs can have in families, and about the positive effects of nurturing and respecting human connections. Thus, on the one hand, policy and practice guidelines must be developed that honor the principles of individuality, autonomy, and self-determination, and on the other hand, the human need for connection and information about oneself (Reamer & Siegel, 2007). The research reported here contributes to the growing body of empirically based knowledge suggesting principles to guide policy and practice:

(1) Open adoption works when it is tailored to the needs, wishes, strengths, and characteristics of each individual situation. Thus, agency policies and clinical practice ought not dictate the type and amount of contact birth and adoptive families should have. One size does not fit all (Grotevant et al., 2005).

(2) Social workers must help each birth family and corresponding adoptive family decide together for themselves what kinds of open adoption arrangements best suit their unique situation. These arrangements may change over time (Wrobel et al., 2003), necessitating consultation from time to time with professionals who have specific training in how to guide open adoption participants (Grotevant, 2000a; Siegel, 2006).

(3) Social workers can help adoptive and birth family members build trusting, respectful, nonjudgmental relationships with each other as they navigate their way through conflicts and disappointments that emerge over time. Previous research has shown that birth and adoptive family members can collaborate effectively (Grotevant, Ross, Marchel, & McRoy, 1999). Social workers can guide

open adoption participants, helping them identify and accept their own feelings and develop empathy for others involved in the extended family of adoption. Social workers can also help open adoption participants learn skills needed for constructive, effective communication and problem solving.

(4) Social workers can help ease myths about open adoption. The growing body of research on open adoption does not corroborate fears that the typical birth parent will intrude in adoptive family life, compete for the child's loyalties, lead the child to play one family off against the other, or abandon the adoptive family during adolescence.

(5) The adoptive parents in this study view birth family members as part of their extended family system, are committed to staying in touch with them, and are able to maintain clear boundaries and roles. Thus, when problems and issues arise in the open adoption relationships

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they are seen as part of a process, not as reasons to sever connection. This strengths perspective, which honors human relationships and views struggles as normal, predictable issues in living, is in sync with social work's values and prevailing theory (Saleebey, 2006; Carter & McGoldrick, 2005).

(6) To pursue these guidelines, social workers must have specialized knowledge and skills. At present, a curriculum addressing adoption issues, and open adoption in particular, is not a Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) accreditation standard for BSW or MSW programs. Hence, every practitioner with clients touched by adoption has a responsibility to self-educate. Journals and continuing education programs that social work and adoption organizations provide can offer empirically based information about open adoption.

More information can be obtained from these families' open adoption experiences. When the children of these open adoptions reach the age of majority and move through adulthood they may tell their own stories, shedding much needed light on the open adoption experience.

Further qualitative descriptive research is needed to describe the kinds of challenges and issues open adoption participants confront and how they cope with them. Research on social workers' views and knowledge about open adoption will contribute to a workforce equipped to help people navigate open adoption relationships throughout life. Client narratives, in their own voices, can inform adoption policies and practices.

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## Endnotes

- 1 A nonprobability sample is acceptable for exploratory research (Denzin, 2005) on new, evolving phenomena. To protect privacy, rather than reaching out directly to potential respondents, the researcher gave an open letter to two New England infertility and adoption support organizations and an interstate compact administrator to distribute to every adoptive parent they knew who had recently finalized an open adoption of a child under age 2 years. The letter invited parents who felt they had an open adoption to participate in a confidential tape-recorded interview in their home to ascertain their reactions to open adoption and help other parents and social workers improve the ways open adoptions are handled. A semistructured interview guide, developed and pretested for the study, was used; interviews lasted from 90 minutes to 4 hours, depending on how much respondents had to say. The researcher wrote a summary of each interview and coded the summaries using customary procedures for analyzing qualitative data (Maxwell, 2005). Themes characterizing respondents' answers to each question were identified. Each respondent was given a copy of the research report to check for accuracy, confidentiality, and researcher bias before submission for publication.
- 2 Seven couples divorced after Phase 1, six of whom asked to be interviewed separately at Phase 3. By Phase 3, two respondents had died, one family had moved out of the country, and three families could not be located. One family that could not be located at Phase 2 resurfaced at Phase 3. By Phase 3, the respondents' mean age was 52 years; six families had adopted one child, nine had adopted two, one family had three, and one had four.
- 3 This boy, adopted as a teenager from the public child welfare system, had a lifelong history of multiple traumas and losses, numerous foster placements, psychiatric hospitalizations, and diagnoses. The disruption was not related to open adoption.