Truth is Better than Fiction: Openness in Adoption

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Topics for This session

- All Parenting is Shared Parenting
- What is Open Adoption? Historical context
- Family Culture and Individual Identity
- What are the Child’s Needs in Open adoption?
- What are Adoptive Parent Issues?
- What are Birth Parent Issues?
- Open Adoption even in Challenging Situations
- Communication about adoption through the years

All Parenting is Shared

- What do you call it?
- What does it mean?
- Belonging without Owning
- Belonging to Multiple Families
- Thinking Beyond Today
- Thinking Beyond Yourself

Role redefinition and relationships

- Parents become like aunts and uncles,
- Adoptive parents, Grandparents, aunts and uncles become parents
- Siblings become cousins
- Friends become family
- Roles change; relationships last

Defining Open Adoption

- Open Adoption VS Openness in Adoption
- Historical Context ~ role of culture in deciding what is best for children
  - Holding vs spoiling
  - Schedule vs “on-demand
  - Stimulation vs soothing
  - Open vs closed

The role of Family Culture in Open Adoption

- What is Family Culture?
- How do I define family?
- How might my child define family?
- Brochure exercise
- Open Adoption as a Blended Family (marriage analogy)
- Family identity includes history, cultural heritage, shared memories, traditions, values, atmospheres/lifestyle and future plans & goals
Family Eco-Map

Rethinking the concept of Identity

- How do I define myself? What do I see as my role in this child’s life?
- What role do parents (adoptive, foster and birth) play in shaping identity?
- What role does extended family play in shaping identity?
- What are the differences between one’s personal identity and a shared family identity?

Keeping Open Adoption Child Centered:

It is important for all to see open adoption as a committed relationship

- Creating rituals to acknowledge the commitment as well as the change in roles. What happens when commitment is one sided.

What are the child’s needs in infant adoption?

- The gift of a united front.
- The importance of consistency and continuity.
- The myth of the “blank slate”.

What are the child’s needs in older child adoption?

- Necessary and unnecessary losses.
- Open adoption does not have to be limited to relationship with the birth parent – consider siblings, grandparents, former foster parents
- The importance of continuity – my past is connected to my present and my future

Adoptive Parent Issues

- Claiming your child and your role.
  - Dealing with birthparent grief.
  - When family and friends are unsupportive.
  - Bonding and attachment.
Adoptive Parent Issues

- A matter of trust.
  - Fostering understanding or helping adoptive parents find their “inner birthparent”.
  - Creating realistic boundaries, not artificial ones.
  - Broken promises – The fine line adoptive parents walk between accepting the personal limitations of birthfamily and over protecting their children.

Birth Parent Issues

- The Information Divide
  - The “educational process” for birthparents.
- Grief, loss and shame.
  - What do birthparents lose in open adoption?
  - Relationship building through grief.
- A matter of trust.
  - Trust in voluntary placement.
  - Trust in involuntary placement.

Family relationships
- Spouses
- Other Children
- Extended Family

Relationship Building: Talking About Adoption

- Talking about adoption.
  - Who, what, when and where?
- Beginning the Relationship
  - Vision Merging in Infant Placements
  - Vision Merging in Older Child Placements.
- Maintaining and changing the Relationship as the child grows.

Dealing with “Negative” Birth Family History

- WHY share difficult information?
  - Truth is Better Than Fiction
  - People are not all good or all bad
  - People can change
  - Sometimes people don’t change
  - Children need closure and wholeness

In a Healing Family We Know we have to work through pain

- We ask if we are prepared for wheelchairs, but do we ask if we are prepared for pain?
- Pain can be a path to healing & wholeness
- Do we want to risk confining our children to “emotional wheelchairs” in order to be kind?
- Comfort where we can, share the discomfort and challenge our children to strive for wholeness

Child Preparation – Preparing an Older Child for A New Family

- Use of lifestory book
  - Who AM I?
  - Where have I been?
  - Where am I going?
  - How will I get there?
  - Who is my family?
  - Does the child have fears of rejection?
  - What is her concept of family and family relationships?
Language Development & Understanding Adoption

- Early Memory Exercise
- What can you remember
- What role did language play?
- What were the significant elements?

Whats in a word?

- http://openadoptioninsight.org/a_few_words_on_words_in_adoption.htm
- http://www.perspectivespress.com/pjpal.html

"Sticks & Stones"
plainjanestudio.com

When?

- From the beginning
- Yes, even infants
- Not a one-time "event" ("the telling")
- Always be honest

How? ~ Here are some Blocks

- Developmentally Appropriate
- Good Communication Skills
- Model Talking about Feelings
- Use multiple strategies & Media
- Develop Story over time
- Help Child Speak for Herself

Communicating with a Young Child About Adoption

- Be comfortable yourself – the emotions will be more important than the words
- Use a lifebook
- Answer what is asked – don't tell the whole story in one sitting!
- Remember – this is a stage of concrete thinking & magical thinking

More Communication Tips with Young Children

- Get at the child’s eye level
- Listen patiently
- Stop what you are doing, practice active listening
- Ask questions to be sure you understand
- Re-state what you think your child is saying
School-Age Child

- Child begins to think abstractly
- “Magic 7” year old
- Allow child to make connections with a lost past (i.e. scrapbook, visit to relatives, hometown, etc.)
- Since this is a developmental stage when “belonging” is important – consider including child in adoption support group activities

More Communication tips for school age children

- Ask questions that require more than a yes or no answer
- Show that you understand (body language, etc)
- Become familiar with the kinds of questions children will ask

Feeling SAD >>>>makes me MAD >>>> which leads to acting BAD

- Model a range of expressions for emotions
- Use stories, movies, puppet play to “practice” and observe lots of emotions
- Provide physical as well as verbal outlets for emotions

Communicating with Teens About Adoption

- Talk about dreams, nightmares
- Use movies, music as discussion starters
- Provide control opportunities
- Respect their desire to get more in touch with their culture and family of origin
- Expect questions about sexuality to be woven into discussions about adoption
- Help teen identify what they need
- Balance “being there” with respect for privacy

Use multiple strategies & media

Help Child Speak for Herself

- Practice at home
- Difference between “private” and “secret”
- Make a “sharing” version of the lifebook
Open Adoption Works

- It takes time
- Preparation of all involved
- Support all along the way
- Belief, trust, faith, hope
- Happy Trails!