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Myth:

Only big risk takers and people who believe in things like open marriage choose an open adoption

Reality:

Our nearly 6000 open adoption parents come from all walks of life and from all across the country. They might be risk-takers, but they do not see openness as a risk. In fact, they see closed adoption as the real risk for their child and for the stability of their adoption.

Open adoption sounds new and radical, but is actually far more normal than closed adoption. In our society, we do not keep our identities secret when we are dealing with each other, and anyone who refuses to give their name is suspect. Would you let a doctor operate on you if he or she had their name badge turned around so you could not see it? Yet closed adoption means hiding your names, having separate entrances for adoptive vs. birthparents, and telling clients to put a bag over their car license plate so the birthmother won't see it, and on and on. That is abnormal.

In fact, for most of the last few hundred years, openness in adoption was simply taken for granted. When you wanted to have a child adopted, it was done within your family or church, synagogue, or mosque. In those days, having the birthmother around was no big deal since the birthmother was usually your sister or aunt or younger daughter.

Myth:

Isn't closed adoption safer than open adoption? Aren't you worried the parents will take the baby back?

Reality:

Almost everyone has read some newspaper or magazine horror story about openness, but there never seems to be stories about closed adoption. So they must be safer. In reality, closed adoptions have a much higher rate of the birthmother taking her child back than open adoption; 30-40% with closed adoption compared to 5% with adoptions through the IAC. You just never read about the failures of closed adoptions because they are, obviously, secret, even when they fail.

Why is an open adoption birthmother less likely to change her mind than with closed adoptions? Picture a young woman going through hours of labor and delivery and agonizing over whether to have her child adopted. Years ago, she would not have had any choice since being a single mother was not acceptable. That is no longer the case. Then the adoption social worker comes in and asks to take the child. The birthmother has had no say about who adopts her child and no idea who that is going to be. She is told to just pretend that the baby is dead. Everything is hush-hush and secret with an air of shame.

Compare that to the situation for birthparents in an open adoption. She (and he) has herself chosen the adoptive parents. She knows her baby will be happy because she knows the adoptive parents and their home. The adoptive parents are right there for her at the birth, and she can see their joy when they take the baby into their arms. Instead of pretending her child is dead, she will know about his or her life with their new family.

If you believed the media, birthmothers have a very long time (6 months to a year) to change their minds or maybe they can even get the baby back years later. Yes, with attorney adoptions, the birthmother may have time to change her mind even after some of the preliminary papers are signed. But with a licensed agency

like the IAC, once she signs the adoption plan, she cannot change her mind without the explicit permission, rarely given, of the adoption agency (the IAC).

Less than 5% of our adoptions fail to work.

Myths:

Who are these birthparents anyway? They are probably a sad lot with drug use and who knows what. And how could they give up their child?

Reality:

Our society's stereotypes about birthmothers and birthfathers are harsh and unforgiving. If these stereotypes were true, people would have good reason to avoid open adoption. However, like many stereotypes, these, too, are inaccurate.

Yes, there are birthparents that are mentally unbalanced or have used drugs or may even be outright frauds. Yet these are the exception, not the rule. Most birthparents are exceptionally fine women and men, acting with considerable courage. In fact, several studies have shown that, compared to young women who choose abortion or single motherhood, women who choose adoption for their child tend to be above average in intelligence, have a higher sense of self-esteem, and, in the long run, are likely to be more successful in their lives.

Another aspect of the stereotype is that birthmothers choose adoption so that they can walk away from the responsibility of parenting. The opposite is the case. Consistently, birthparents --birthmothers in particular -- decide for adoption because parenting is so important to them that they want to be parents at the right time, and with the right partner. While they may be deciding to have someone else raise this particular child, they are not throwing away parenting. Choosing to have their child adopted is itself a parenting choice; a terribly difficult decision about what would be in the long term, best interest of their child.

Myth:

The birthmother has all the power, and, to make matters worse, the adoptive family gives up all right to privacy.

Reality:

In the past, social workers or judges or attorneys made the decision about who adopted what baby. In open adoption, the people for whom this matters the most -- the adoptive parents and birthparents -- are the ones making the decision. And shouldn't it be that way?

The birthparents do make the initial choice but the prospective adoptive parents still must choose back to make the adoption work. A surprise to many people is that the birthmothers worry too, just like the adoptive parents. But the birthparents worry that the adoptive parents will change their mind about adopting their child.

Yes, everyone involved knows everyone else, as you usually do when deciding something important. But that does not mean it is public knowledge. Even in open adoption, these matters are the private affair of the people involved and only becomes more out in public if they all choose to make it so.

Myth:

Doesn't adoption at birth break the natural bond between biological mother and father and the child? Aren't children always better off with their biological parents?

Reality:

What bonds a child to their parents is not the birth experience or the familiar voices or smells. The memory of the birth experience fades as the child's mind is filled with all the sensory input of their new world, a world that they share with whoever is actually taking care of them, talking to them, sharing their world. Whether that person is also the biological parent is simply irrelevant.

Whether any adult becomes the psychological parent of a child is based thus on day-to-day interaction, companionship and shared experiences. The role can be fulfilled either by a biological parent, or by an adoptive parent or by any other caring adult—but never by an absent, inactive adult, whatever his biological or legal relationship to the child may be. (p. 19) Joseph Goldstein, Anna Freud, and Albert Solnit, *Beyond the Best Interests of the Child*, 1979

Consider what would happen if you, yourself, found out today that your parents were not your biological parents (assuming of course that you are not actually adopted). What would be your reaction? Perhaps shock or anger towards your parents for withholding this information but would they suddenly no longer be your parents? Of course not. Good or bad, our relationships with our parents are an ongoing, interactive experience.

Myth:

Open adoption is hard on the children; aren't they confused as to who are their real parents?

Reality

For the child, the benefits of open adoption can eliminate a harmful lifetime darkness of never knowing answers to many emotional unanswered questions. Openness allows an adopted child to go on with life and development without mysteries as to their birthparents, brothers or sisters, health history and genetic roots. It solidifies the adoptive child's relationships by knowing the people who are raising him are his true life-long parents, family and home, while having the comfort of other special people in their lives, from aunts and uncles to birthparents. Without unnecessary mysteries or secrets for all parties, lives can go on more peacefully.

The children in an open adoption simply do not feel any contradiction between having one set of regular parents -- their adoptive parents-- and one set of biological parents. They just take that for granted as perfectly normal. But they always know to whom to turn for parenting.

It was our adopted son Carl's sixth birthday and his birthmother, Karen, came for a visit to our home in Iowa. For some unknown reason, the kids started talking about babies. Suddenly, Carl walked over to Karen, his birthmother, pointed to her stomach, and said to the other kids, "That is where I came from." The kids kept on going, but the adults were left speechless. Then, a few minutes later, my son Carl fell down on the stairs and banged his knee. He ran right past his birthmother without even giving her a look, and right

straight to me. He was crying loudly Mommy, Mommy, Mommy." Sure, he knew his biological origins, but he also knew who his mom was.

Recently, I observed as a reporter, writing a story on open adoption, interviewing Nick, a ten-year-old boy adopted in an open adoption.

The reporter kept asking Nick (adopted ten year old) if he felt funny about having two sets of parents. Finally, Nick frowned, shook his head, and said to the reporter, "You mean to say that I have these parents who love me all the time and I have these two other people out there who also love me, and that is bad? I don't get it!" Then, as if to clinch his argument, Nick asked the reporter a question "How many children do you have?" The reporter replied that he had two children, a son, and a daughter. Nick looked him right in the eye and asked him, "Do you find it confusing to have two children?" The reporter laughed and finally understood.

Myth:

Isn't open adoption shared parenting?

Reality:

Adoption is not shared parenthood. The adoptive parents are the parents, period. Legally, a birthparent has no more right to take the child away than a perfect stranger. If the birthparents wanted to be parents, they would have kept the child, especially since adoption is so much more difficult than the other alternatives. The birthparents have chosen a particular couple precisely because they wanted these folks to be their child's parents. They feel the connection to the child but as a loving relative, no longer as a parent.

The first time I saw my birthson, Max, and I was not the mommy, it was strange. But to be truthful, I was glad I wasn't the mommy. Max was at that stage where he had just learned to walk and was running everywhere. Martha [the adopting mother] is just such a good parent and I'm so grateful she is the one dealing with all of that.

Myth:

Will the adoptive parents ever feel like the true parents?

Reality:

It has been closed adoption, with all its secrecy and shame, not open adoption, that often left the new parents feeling like they were not true parents. In open adoption, there is not this sense of hiding something, and the new parents know they were the birthmother's choice, not some anonymous agency or attorney.

After the birth, the adoptive parents spend hour after hour with their baby, feeding them, talking to them, and changing their diapers. They see their child's first smile, hear their first words. This is what parenting is about, not biology.

For the birthparents, seeing their child with their new family deepens their sense that, as one birthmother explained, "the baby is still my baby but she is not my daughter."

We invited Kathy and Mark, the birthparents of Georgia, our adopted daughter, over for their first visit. I asked her if she would like to hold Georgia. She said yes but was quite nervous about it. And any parent

knows what happened next: Kathy took the baby and the Georgia started to cry because she knew she was not with her mother.

Myth:

You cannot really adopt a healthy child in this country, unless you are young (under 40 or even younger), married for years and years and maybe even be of a certain religion. And even then, it may still not happen

Reality:

So many more women are willing to do an open than a closed adoption that the clients of an open adoption program become parents much more quickly. Because the decisions about adopting a child are made by the birthparents, not the agency, issues like age or marital status are simply not important.

With a program like the IAC ,with a national reputation and a \$500,000_+ advertising and outreach budget, people of all ages typically adopt with a year to 18 months and often much sooner than that.

How can we help?

Be sensitive to how difficult this can be for prospective adoptive parents. Appreciate their courage to do an open adoption because they know that will be best for their child. And please don't tell them to relax and you will get pregnant:í that just makes the people feel even worse.

Keep your eyes open for possible adoption situations. You never know if you will hear about a woman considering adoption at your church or the repair garage.

And stop people when they say, innocently or not, disparaging things about birthparents or imply that somehow adoptive families are not as good as biological families.