

Module #10 Openness in Adoption

Handout #10.2 Key Principles For Current Practice on Openness in Adoption

- **The importance of honoring the child's beginning and past.** Children know anyway, that something major happened in their lives; it is stored in their cellular or implicit memory.
- **Honesty.** Children may find out the details of their history in the midst of some trauma or major life event. When they do, it can trigger a sense of betrayal and a fear that nothing in their lives is true. This inhibits trust of adults, and creates fractures in the relationships within the family.
- **Increased self-esteem.** If the family is afraid to have a relationship with the birth family, the message is for a child is that where the child comes from is very scary and the child has something to worry about, or it is not worth the time and energy of the adoptive parents to build and/or keep the relationship. If, in time, the child makes contact with birth family and finds that the fear was baseless, the adoptive family could bear the brunt of the child's anger and resentment about the lack of respect for the birth family.
- **Children's lives do not begin the day they are adopted.** Children have had a biological birth, perhaps several moves with different families, and then a legal rebirth into their permanent family. Knowing the child's beginnings helps the child understand their journey and how they came to be adopted. In actuality, the child's past explains the reason why they needed to be adopted. In a confidential adoption, by contrast, the past becomes frozen at a certain place and time and information becomes outdated quickly.
- **Open adoption allows for fresh information to be integrated into the child's understanding of themselves in an appropriate developmental phase.** Knowledge prevents the child from creating a false past. For adoptive parents, knowing the child's family of origin helps them to understand how best to parent this particular person and to incorporate the child's cultural, racial and spiritual identities.
- **An open adoption allows for sibling connections over time, which offers the child the opportunity to see him or herself reflected in another human being, through interests, humor, skills and temperament.** In placements of older children from the child welfare system, connections between siblings also provide access to family history, common experiences and validation of memories.
- **The importance of having ongoing medical and familial information that allows for the child's realistic creation of their future.** There is always new information over time about medical, emotional and psychological issues; births and deaths; marriages and divorces; that informs a child's safety and well-being over time

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- **Accepting reality.** Truth trumps fantasy every time: fantasies flourish where facts flounder. Secrecy implies that there is something wrong or shameful about the child's adoption.
- **Optimizing learning.** Children are often preoccupied with their fantasies, especially at certain developmental stages. This can interfere with learning and cause behaviors that are not easily interpreted and could disrupt healthy relationships. When there are secrets in the family, certain topics are avoided, which can contribute to a child's fear and possible low self-esteem. Secrecy can also create anxiety.
- **Diminishing anxiety and opening communication for the child about what it is safe to communicate to their parents.** The fear of saying things that might be hurtful to their parents necessitates hyper-vigilance as the child is trying to read the adults' reactions.
- **Support and deepen family attachments.** A web of secrecy that begins with the pregnancy and birthing story, how the family came to adopt this particular child, the truths about strengths and challenges of the family of origin and the actual telling of the child's story over time can be disruptive to family attachment. It impacts the dynamics of the adoptive family throughout the raising, emancipating and intergenerational aspects of family life. Acknowledging the child's prior attachments and supporting the confrontation of difficult information together deepen attachments in the adoptive family.
- **The belief in what is best for the child over time, not what is convenient for the adult.** Always do what is possible "for now" knowing that things can change, both for the better or worse, and that the child's needs must be in the forefront of all decisions.
- **Adults shouldering the burdens that adoption can create for a child.** The belief that the adults need to carry the extra tasks that adoption creates for children and families, rather than placing that work on the shoulders of the growing, developing child.