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Impact of Adoption on Birth Parents



This factsheet discusses some of the emotional issues that parents may face after making the decision to place an infant for adoption, in surrendering the child, and in handling the feelings that often persist afterwards. It may be a helpful resource for birth parents as well as family members, friends, and others who want to support birth parents. It may also provide insight to adopted persons and adoptive parents who want to understand the struggles faced by birth parents.

What's Inside:

- Responding to the adoptive placement
- Gaining control and resolution
- Maintaining contact
- Resources



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The information provided also may be applicable to parents whose children have been removed from their home and whose parental rights have been terminated.

It is difficult to generalize about the feelings or experiences of all birth parents. Many birth parents feel that the child will have a better life in an adoptive home and are putting the child's best interests ahead of their own when they make the decision to place the child for adoption (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2007). Other reasons birth parents place their children for adoption include societal and family attitudes, personal goals and ambitions, and socioeconomic situations (Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute, 2007). Each birth parent has faced a unique experience and dealt with the situation in his or her own way, but certain themes emerge in the literature, including grief, guilt, and resolution. This factsheet addresses these issues, as well as issues concerning possible contact. Helpful resources, such as websites, documents, and organizations, provide additional information.

Responding to the Adoptive Placement

Birth parents often describe a variety of feelings and experiences, including grief, thinking about the child, guilt and shame, identity issues, and effects on other relationships.

Grieving the Loss of the Child

Placing a child for adoption can be traumatic for the birth parents (Henney, Ayers-Lopez, McRoy, & Grotevant, 2007).

Most parents considering placing their child for adoption struggle with the decision. Parents who decide to place their child for adoption begin to plan for a great loss in their own lives with the hope that the decision will result in a better life for their baby and for themselves. The birth and the actual surrendering of the baby may prompt various phases of grief in the birth parents, including shock and denial, sorrow and depression, anger, guilt, and acceptance (Romanchik, 1999).

All these feelings are normal reactions to loss. Birth parents may feel a sense of ambiguous loss, or the loss of someone who still is or who may be alive, which is different than the loss of someone who has died (Powell & Afifi, 2005). Friends and family of the birth parents may attempt to ignore the loss by pretending that nothing has happened, or they may not understand what the birth parents are experiencing (Aloi, 2009; Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute, 2007). Although many people view the loss of a child as the most traumatic event one can experience, they may not accord birth parents an appropriate level of sympathy because the loss is viewed as a "choice." In some cases, the secrecy surrounding the pregnancy and adoption may make it difficult for birth parents to seek out and find support as they grieve their loss. In addition, the lack of formal rituals or ceremonies to mark this type of loss may make it more difficult to acknowledge the loss and therefore to acknowledge the grief as a normal process (Aloi, 2009).

The actual physical separation from the child generally occurs soon after the birth. Many circumstances can have an impact

on the birth parent's feelings at the time, including mixed feelings about the adoptive placement, support from other family members and the other birth parent, and whether the planned adoption is open (i.e., allowing some later contact with the child). The actions of the agency personnel (if an agency is involved), as well as those of the adoption attorney, adoptive parents, hospital personnel, and physician can all affect the feelings of the birth mother and father as they proceed through the adoption process and the termination of their parental rights.

When birth parents first deal with their loss, the grief may be expressed as denial. The denial serves as a buffer to shield them from the pain of the loss. This may be followed by sorrow or depression as the loss becomes more real. Anger and guilt may follow, with anger sometimes being directed at those who helped with the adoption placement, especially if there was coercion, no matter how subtle, or if the mother had no other viable options. The final phases, those of acceptance and resolution, refer not to eliminating the grief permanently but to integrating the loss into ongoing life (Romanchik, 1999).

Many birth parents continue to mourn the loss of their child throughout their lifetime, but with varying intensity. In a study of birth mothers 12 to 20 years after placement, approximately three-quarters continued to experience some feelings of grief and loss, and one-quarter reported no current grief or loss (Henney et al., 2007). Some of the factors that have been found to be associated with longstanding grief include:

- A birth parent's feeling that she was pressured into placing her child for adoption against her will (De Simone, 1996)
- Feelings of guilt and shame regarding the placement (De Simone)
- Lack of opportunity to express feelings about the placement (De Simone)
- Dissatisfaction with an open adoption (Henney et al.)
- Having a closed adoption (Henney et al.)

Grieving Other Losses

Placing a child for adoption may also cause other (secondary) losses, which may add to the grief that birth parents feel. They may grieve for the loss of their parenting roles and for the person their child might have become as their son or daughter. These feelings of loss may reemerge in later years, for instance, on the child's birthday, or when the child is old enough to start school or reach other developmental milestones. Some clinicians report that birth parents may experience additional grief when they have other children because it reminds them of the loss of this child on a daily basis or, if they encounter future infertility, they may perceive the loss as a "punishment."

Thinking About the Child

Birth parents are unlikely to "forget" the child they placed for adoption. In one study, all the birth mothers, including those in both open and closed adoptions, reported thinking about or feeling something about the child to some extent, with the average response indicating occasional thoughts or feelings. These thoughts and feelings were

both positive and negative, but they tended to be more positive when the adoption was more open (Lewis Fravel, McRoy, & Grotevant, 2000). Additionally, birth parents who are not in contact with the child may maintain fantasies about the child, such as continuing to visualize the child as an infant years after the adoption (Rosenberg & Groze, 1997).

Guilt and Shame

Birth parents may experience guilt and shame for having placed their child for adoption due to the social stigma that some attach to this (De Simone, 1996; Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute, 2007). This guilt and shame may exacerbate the grief being felt by the birth parents. Some birth parents may feel shame in admitting the situation to parents, friends, coworkers, and others. Once the child is born, the decision to place the child for adoption may prompt new feelings of guilt about “rejecting” the child, no matter how thoughtful the decision or what the circumstances of the adoption. Other birth parents may feel guilt or shame because they kept the pregnancy or adoption a secret.

Identity Issues

Placing a child for adoption may trigger identity issues in some birth parents. They may need to determine *who* the child will be in their lives and *how* the child will be in their lives (Lewis Fravel et al., 2000). Birth parents will need to redefine their relationship to the child (Romanchik, 1999). Their status as parents may not be acknowledged among family and friends, and if they go on to have other children whom they raise, this may also affect how

the birth parents view their own identity, as well as that of all their children. Birth parents in open or mediated (i.e., semi-open) adoptions may face additional identity issues as they interact with the adoptive family. In one study, adolescents who were adopted and in contact with their birth mothers most frequently noted their birth mother’s role as a friend, with some also reporting relative, another parent, or birth mother role (Grotevant et al., 2007). In another study, birth mothers most frequently desired to play a nonkin role in the birth child’s life (Ayers-Lopez, Henney, McRoy, Hanna, & Grotevant, 2008). This relationship, as well as the birth parent’s perception of his or her identity, may change over time due to various issues, such as formal changes to the level of openness or the adopted child’s wishes.

Effect on Other Relationships

Some birth parents may have trouble forming and maintaining relationships (Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute, 2007). This may be due to lingering feelings of loss and guilt, or it may be due to a fear of repeating the loss. Other birth parents may attempt to fill the loss quickly by establishing a new relationship, marrying, or giving birth again—without having dealt with the grief of the adoptive placement. In a study comparing teens who had placed their infants for adoption and those who parented them, though, birth mothers who placed their children had a more positive quality of relationship with their partners (Namerow, Kalmuss, & Cushman, 1997). A few birth parents report being overprotective of their subsequent children because they are afraid of repeating the

experience of separation and loss (Askren & Bloom, 1999).

For some birth parents, the ability to establish a successful marriage or long-term relationship may depend on the openness with which they can discuss their past experiences of birth and adoption placement. Some birth parents never tell their spouses or subsequent children of their earlier child (Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute, 2007). Others are comfortable enough with their decision to be able to share their past.

In some cases, the birth mother may lose her relationship with the birth father under the stress of the pregnancy, birth, and subsequent placement decision. The birth parents may also lose relationships with their own parents, whose disappointment or disapproval may be accompanied by a lack of support. In extreme cases, the birth mother may need to leave her parents and her home. The birth mother may lose her place in the educational system or in the workplace as a result of the pregnancy. Birth parents may also lose friends who are not supportive of either the pregnancy or the decision to place the child for adoption (Romanichik, 1999).

Gaining Control and Resolution

Each individual's path toward reconciling the placement of a child for adoption is different, but there are some common themes: (1) resolving grief, (2) making peace with the decision, (3) incorporating being a birth parent into one's identity, and (4)

overcoming the effect of the experience on other relationships (Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute, 2007). Acceptance of the loss and working through the grief does not mean that birth parents forget their birth child and never again feel sorrow or regret for the loss. Rather, it means that they are able to move forward and integrate this loss into their ongoing lives. For those in an open adoption, this may mean developing a new relationship with the child and the adoptive parents. For birth parents whose child was adopted in a closed adoption, it may mean learning to live with uncertainty about whether the parent will ever see the child again.

The following describes ways birth parents may cope with the placement of their child:

- **Rituals.** Birth parents may find it helpful to create a tradition that honors the child and the decision that was made. Some birth and adoptive parents use an entrustment ceremony as a ritual to transfer parental roles. Entrustment ceremonies can take place in the hospital, a church, a home, or any other location in which the families feel comfortable. There are no guidelines to an entrustment ceremony; the families can tailor the ceremony to fit their needs and wishes. Entrustment ceremonies allow the birth parents to say good-bye to their child and to maintain a sense of control over the placement. Birth parents also may choose to establish other ongoing or finite rituals, such as commemorating certain days or milestones in the child's life, such as the child's birthday or a high school graduation or writing a letter to the child, whether they send it or not.

- **Finding Support.** Birth parents can seek out family, friends, support groups of other birth parents, or understanding counselors to communicate their feelings and gain support. Being able to openly share feelings is often helpful in moving through the stages of grief and achieving some resolution.
- **Education.** There are a number of books, articles, and websites (including blogs) about adoption and the birth parent experience. Many of these include first-person accounts from birth parents, which can provide some context about what other birth parents experience. These resources can be helpful to birth parents who may feel that they are alone in their loss.
- **Writing.** Birth parents may find it useful to keep a journal or blog of their experiences and feelings. This may serve as an outlet for grief or other emotions, and it can also serve to provide some perspective over time. Keeping a journal also allows birth parents to remember details that might otherwise be forgotten over the years.
- **Counseling.** Birth parents may find that they need more support than family and friends can offer, or they may be unable to move forward in the grieving process. In such cases, professional counseling may help the birth parent make progress in dealing with the grief or may reassure the parent that such feelings are normal. A counselor should be able to help a birth parent replace unrealistic fantasy with reality, to acknowledge what has happened, and to accept the reality of the birth parent role. Birth parents should look for counselors who have significant experience with adoption and with

bereavement. Referrals for counselors may come from friends, birth parent support groups, or from the adoption agency or attorney who helped with the adoption.

- **Other Postadoption Services.** Birth parents also may benefit from postadoption services, such as support groups or mentoring programs. Some birth parents may be reluctant to return to the agencies that facilitated their placements and seek out in-home services or other agencies (Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute, 2007).

While the birth parent will never forget the child, it is important that the birth parent adapts to the new circumstances and comes to terms with any regret. When birth parents are able to integrate the loss into their lives and gain some feeling of control, they can then move on to deal with whatever else life brings to them.

Maintaining Contact

Placing a child for adoption does not necessarily mean a birth parent will never be able to contact the child again. Adoption can have some degree of openness, including some communication between the birth and adoptive families, or the birth family or the adopted person may attempt a search and reunite later in life. Birth and adoptive parents need to determine the level of openness that best matches the needs and wishes of all parties. Birth parents can benefit from information about the advantages of open adoption for children.

The number of open adoptions (in which the birth and adoptive families know each other's identities and have direct contact)

and mediated adoptions (in which contacts between the birth and adoptive families are made indirectly through a mediator) are on the rise. In a 2012 survey of adoption agencies with infant adoption programs, agencies reported that only 5 percent of their placements during the previous 2 years were confidential, with 55 percent of the adoptions being fully disclosed and 40 percent being mediated (Siegel & Livingston Smith, 2012). Although the context around each adoption is unique, research indicates that open adoption can be beneficial for birth parents. Birth parents in an open adoption have been shown to have better postadoption adjustment, increased satisfaction with the adoption process, and better grief resolution (Henney et al., 2007; Ge et al., 2008). For additional information about open adoption and birth family contact, visit Child Welfare Information Gateway at <https://www.childwelfare.gov/adoption/adoptive/contacts.cfm>.

Even if an adoption was not structured as having some level of openness, or if the level of openness has declined over time, birth families and adopted persons still may seek out each other on their own. In a study of 125 birth mothers' intentions to search for their children, 33 percent stated they would not initiate a search, 50 percent stated they would initiate a search, and 17 percent indicated they might initiate a search (Ayers-Lopez et al., 2008). The primary reasons provided for not searching were that the birth mothers felt it was the child's right to decide whether to initiate the search and that they did not want to disrupt or complicate the child's life. The primary reasons provided for wanting to initiate a search were (1) desiring to have contact and a relationship with the child and (2) wanting to know about the child.

Nearly four-fifths of the birth mothers felt their children might search for them, with most of those mothers feeling positive about possible contact.

SEARCH AND REUNION AND THE INTERNET

With seemingly everything available on the Internet, birth families and adopted persons are much more easily able to research contact information and establish connections than they have been in the past. This increase in information availability is changing the landscape of privacy and confidentiality, including in adoption (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2013b). With a simple Internet search or a review of social media sites, individuals may be able to quickly determine identities and establish connections. Search and reunion among birth parents and adopted persons is not new, but the speed at which it can occur is. Because of the sometimes instantaneous nature of the Internet, connections may be attempted without giving pause for self-reflection, consideration of the consequences, or assistance from support systems, such as family, friends, and professionals (Howard, 2012).

Since search and reunion can be enormously emotional and may tap into strong feelings of separation and loss, adoption professionals strongly recommend emotional preparation before search and reunion. Preparation will help individuals think through their expectations and prepare for a range of potential reactions from the other party, including rejection (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2013a).

Conclusion

Although the decision to place a child for adoption can be a painful process and affect many aspects of a birth parent's life, many birth parents are able to reconcile the loss and make peace with the decision. Recent shifts away from secrecy and toward openness in adoption are not a panacea for the grief, loss, or other negative experiences a birth parent may have, but research indicates that openness can be beneficial to birth parents, as well as people who were adopted. Additionally, the ever-increasing availability of information and supports for birth parents, particularly on the Internet, provides a way for parents make a more informed decision, find assistance as they move through the process, and discover other parents who have had similar experiences.

Resources

Child Welfare Information Gateway.

This service of the Children's Bureau provides information and publications about a wide range of adoption topics. It also provides adoption statutes for each State.

- *Impact of Adoption on Adopted Persons* (https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f_adimpact.cfm)
- *Searching for Birth Relatives* (https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f_search.cfm)
- *Searching for Birth Relatives* (list of organizations) (https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/reslist/rl_dsp.cfm?svcID=132&rate_chno=AR-0031A)

- *Are You Pregnant and Thinking About Adoption?* (https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f_pregna/index.cfm)
- *Openness in Adoption: Building Relationships Between Adoptive and Birth Families* (https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f_openadopt.cfm)
- *Working With Birth and Adoptive Families to Support Open Adoption* (https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f_openadoptbulletin.cfm)
- *Laws Related to Adoption* (<https://www.childwelfare.gov/adoption/laws/>)
- *State Statutes Search* (https://www.childwelfare.gov/systemwide/laws_policies/state/)
- *National Foster Care & Adoption Directory Search* (<https://www.childwelfare.gov/nfcad/>)

America Adopts: Birth Mother Blogs.

This website helps connect prospective birth and adoptive parents and also includes a series of blogs by birth mothers. <http://www.americaadopts.com/birth-mother-blogs/>

Concerned United Birthparents (CUB).

This is a national organization focused on birth parents. <http://www.cubirthparents.org>

Donaldson Adoption Institute.

The Adoption Institute provides information about a wide array of adoption issues. <http://www.adoptioninstitute.org>

IChooseAdoption.org. This website, which was developed by the National Council for Adoption, provides adoption stories and resources for birth parents, adopted parents, and adopted persons. <http://ichooseadoption.org/>

Insight: Open Adoption Resources and Support. The Insight website offers resources for professionals, adoptive parents, and birth parents considering open adoption. <http://www.openadoptioninsight.org>

Minnesota/Texas Adoption Research Project. This website provides information on a longitudinal study of openness in adoption. <http://www.psych.umass.edu/adoption>

National Resource Center for Permanency and Family Connections. This service of the Children's Bureau provides training, technical assistance, and information services regarding a variety of permanency issues, including the topic of birth family support and education. http://www.hunter.cuny.edu/socwork/nrcfcpp/info_services/birth-family-issues.html

Open Adoption Bloggers. This website lists more than 300 blogs about open adoption, including those by birth parents, adoptive parents, and individuals who were adopted. <http://openadoptionbloggers.com>

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