

# ***Opening Up an Adoption During Childhood***

***By Ally Burr-Harris, Ph.D.***

## Guidelines for Adoptive Parents:

When we first set out on the journey of adoption, we forget how much life can change along the way. It may be that a closed adoption made sense initially, but circumstances have changed. It may be that you and the birth family set out to have an open adoption but lost contact with one another. Possibly your child is asking questions now and showing a yearning for connection with their roots... or maybe something has shifted in you. Maybe you feel a responsibility to pave the way and support your child in establishing contact and defining what this relationship will look like. The situation may have also changed for your child's birth family, allowing for an open adoption now. Problems that prevented them from parenting their child initially may now be overcome. Then again, it may be that it was not even your decision. You may be at this point because your teenager found their birth family via social media unbeknownst to you. Regardless of the reasons, discovering that increased openness is a possibility can be both thrilling and frightening, and it requires careful planning. With this in mind, the following recommendations are offered.

***Find out what your child wants first.*** Do they have questions, wishes, expectations? Are their expectations realistic? Do they want contact or just want information? If they resist visits but the timing feels right to you, what is the resistance about?

***At all times, focus on your child's needs.*** In your eagerness to open up the adoption, are you in tune with your child's needs? Is your child ready? Or, is the timing right but they are simply afraid? As is the case with other milestones, children sometimes need a loving nudge to take a risk. As one parent explained to her son, "It is your job to decide whether you want to have a relationship with your birth mom. It is my job to introduce you and make it possible for you." It is important to differentiate the child's needs from the child's wishes. Just because the child wants to vacation with the birth family or to have a sleepover at the birth family's home, does not mean it is what the child needs. Is your child ready for face-to-face visits? What would be the signs that it is too much too soon for your child?

***Take it slow.*** When contact is made, there is sometimes an eagerness to jump right in and have a visit with the child and birth parent. Once you have reestablished contact, there are different levels of contact. You can start with sharing pictures, emails, and letters at the adult level between adoptive parents and birth parents. You can then move to exchanges of cards or letters between the child and birth parent. A virtual visit is another step that could come before an in-person visit.

Ally Burr-Harris, Ph.D. Licensed Psychologist

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***Consider a preliminary parent meeting.*** I recommend that birth parents and adoptive parents get together first before including the child to discuss expectations for future contact and to clarify boundaries, appropriate conversation topics, and so on. If you are concerned about whether the adult emotions will be able to be kept in line with your child's needs during a visit, you can have phone calls or virtual visits beforehand to test the waters.

***Plan initial meetings in a neutral space that feels safe to your child.*** When you do have a visit, find out from your child what feels like a safe place. Often it works best to have short visits on neutral grounds initially such as the adoption agency, a park, or the zoo.

***Stay close to your child during visits.*** I strongly recommend that adoptive parents be present during all points of initial child visits with birth family members because this conveys an important reassurance of your child's continued standing within your family. I would only veer from this recommendation if there were unique circumstances such as an older adolescent requesting that the visit be with a therapist or social worker present rather than adoptive parents. Another possibility might be if there were safety concerns or incompatibility concerns between the birth family and adoptive family. In such a situation, it is still important for there to be a trusted, familiar adult with the child throughout the visit who can serve as a bridge and source of reassurance.

***Pay attention to your child's stage of development*** when deciding if it is the right time. Good windows for increasing openness are when the child is very little (before the age of 4), between the ages of 8 and 12, and mid to late adolescence. Difficult times for increased openness are the early elementary school age years, as well as early adolescence. When children are between the ages of 5 and 8, the reality of both the happy and sad parts of adoption are setting in. In gaining one family, they lost another family...or at least this is how they potentially see it. They are also entering an age when other children ask more questions, and they become sensitive to the "differentness" of being adopted, particularly if it is a visibly obvious adoption (e.g., transracial adoption). Children this age tend to also think in concrete or "all or nothing" terms, and it can be confusing for them to have new relationships with unclear rules or boundaries. Thus, adoption can feel a bit loaded, and the idea of starting contact with birth family members at this time might raise a lot of anxiety for children.

In contrast, the window of 8 to 12 years is often a good time for increasing openness in relationships. They are potentially more secure in their feelings about adoption, better able to understand different roles and relationships, aware of the permanency of adoption, and yet they are also still connected to their adoptive parents. Typically, they have yet to push away from parents, to romanticize the parents that didn't raise them, or to enter the rebellion stage of adolescence. This is often why it is trickier to open adoption in early adolescence (and mid-adolescence for some teens). If they are at the height of pushing away the parents that are raising

Ally Burr-Harris, Ph.D. Licensed Psychologist

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them, they may be seeking out contact with birth parents due to unrealistic or reactive expectations. That said, sometimes adoptions open up because the “situation is right,” even if it is not the optimal developmental window.

Keep in mind that children who joined your family at a later age may still be establishing a secure attachment with you. They may also have developmental delays as a result of early trauma. For this reason, you also need to consider your child’s level of maturity and readiness for openness. If you are still establishing a secure attachment with your child, you may also need to delay opening up an adoption more until your child has established stronger trust in their safety within your family and the permanency of their adoption.

***Respect and acknowledge the differences between the birth and adoptive families.*** There may be differences in values, education, lifestyle, history, income, opportunities, religion, relationship types, culture, location, parent age, communication styles, and home environment. This can make it tricky! Be careful not to judge simply because you have walked a different path. Remember that part of your child’s identity will come from their birth parents, and it is important to honor and respect what they bring to the table.

***Make your boundaries and expectations clear.*** An open adoption does not mean that there are not rules or boundaries. If there are certain life choices or values that might come up with the birth parents that are not consistent with your values, you need to be clear on the do’s and don’ts with the birth family members. For example, you may need to make a rule of no racist jokes, no drinking alcohol or smoking cigarettes, or no swearing during visits. If you have concerns about the safety or stability of the birth parent, this may not be the time to initiate visits with your child. It may be that you need to instead limit contact to emails and parent-to-parent phone calls for the time being. Since the time of the pandemic, another potential boundary that has come up is whether people are vaccinated or at risk of Covid exposure. These are challenging conversations to have with birth family members, yet it is critical that you be able to establish boundaries to ensure safety and that you are honoring the values of your family.

***Discuss expectations for contact in advance.*** It will be important for the adoptive parents, adoptee, other children in the home, birth parents, and other birth family members to be crystal clear in terms of expectations. How often will you see each other? Where will visits occur? How long will visits last? Who will attend during visits? Are hugs okay? What if your child resists hugs? What will the children call the birth parents and adoptive parents? How should the birth parents interact with your other children? What are the rules about gifts? Is it okay to bring up past issues such as the circumstances that led to the adoption plan? What if the child asks questions? Who will be paying for any shared activities during visits? What if other birth family members want to have visits? What if your child misbehaves during a visit? It may be necessary to clarify that you do the disciplining for the children that you are raising. Similarly, if the birth

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parent has children they are raising, they should be in charge of disciplining this child during visits. Sometimes there is jealousy among the children during visits. A birth sibling may feel jealous of the special attention that the adoptee is getting during a visit and may resort to “pay back” child behaviors. Such a situation requires careful coordination across adults in order to be sensitive to the needs of all children during the visit.

***Prepare for reactions from others who may not support your decision.*** Just because you have decided that open adoption is the right choice for your family does not mean that your friends and family will agree. They may judge your decision, be fearful for how it will affect your child, or even worry that the new birth family bond will jeopardize their bond with your child. Be sensitive to their anxieties and potential lack of information about the positive benefits of open adoption. Gently help them to learn more about open adoption and let them know what kind of support you need from them.

***Maintain empathy for the experience of birth family members.*** Keep in mind that this is probably going to be scary and confusing for the birth parents. They most likely are not sure what to do or how to interact with you or your child. They will want to respect your role and not overstep boundaries, but they may not know what is okay for them to do or say. The more that you can discuss this with them, the easier it will be for them to simply relax, connect, and enjoy their time with you and your child. Birth parents may also have a great deal of shame, grief, or fear that your child will not be able to accept them or forgive them for not being able to raise them. They may be tempted to jump into discussions defending their character or reasons that your child could not remain in their care. While it is important to establish boundaries around conversations like this (particularly if comments jeopardize your child’s sense of security within your family), it is also important to remember that such comments are coming from a place of fear and a desire for birth parents to be accepted or forgiven by your child.

***Monitor visits between birth and adoptive siblings closely.*** Keep in mind that children raised in different families and cultures may have very different understandings of adoption and may also have been exposed to different values and life experiences. While it can be exciting to open up an adoption and allow your child to have visits with birth siblings, this is often where hurtful or confusing comments can take place in interactions. Children will often want to go off and play with one another while the adults visit in a different room. Yet, it is important to provide supervision and proximity to ensure that appropriate conversation and behavior is maintained. As an example, a child in the care of birth family members may tell a birth sibling in your family messages like “we are your real family” and inadvertently create confusion or a sense of “divided loyalty” for your child.

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### **Guidelines for Birth Parents:**

First, let me say, that you are courageous. It is scary to reenter the picture with a child who you were not able to raise. You may fear that your child is angry at you. You may worry that your child does not know that you love them. You may want to scoop up your child, hug them, tell them you love them, and reassure them that you think of them every day. You may want to show your tears and let your child know the pain and grief that came with losing the chance to raise them. Yet, you also know that you need to pace things in such a way that it does not overwhelm your child or frighten their adoptive parents. You want to do everything right. At the same time, you probably have no idea how you are supposed to act. There are no guidelines on how to be a birth parent to a child who has been adopted by another family.

In addition to your grief, your anxiety, and your uncertainty about how to act, there is another variable here. Your child is part of you...they may look like you, have your mannerisms, have your spunkiness. Yet, they have been raised in a different family. Odds are high that this family also has access to opportunities that you did not have. They may have jobs that are intimidating. They may have many more years of education. They may have a different culture, religion, or background. When you open up an adoption, you enter into their world. As you establish a relationship with your birth child, you are doing this within the context of their adoptive family. This means that you need to try to understand and respect their values and their ways of parenting. This is hard to do sometimes. I encourage you to look through the recommendations that I have already provided for the adoptive parents. It will be important to be familiar with the role that they will play in planning for visits between you and your child. This might also help you to think of questions that you need to ask, particularly if they forget to bring them up or are struggling to push through the discomfort of bringing them up with you.

***If you want to tell your child something about your history or your reasons for making an adoption plan, and you are worried that it might be too much too soon, ask the adoptive parents first.*** Write down what you want to share and then decide together on when the child would be old enough to hear this information. Keep a journal of what you want to eventually share with your birth child when they are ready.

***Be careful to keep your emotional display in check and match it with what your child can tolerate.*** Sobbing during the initial hug may be very overwhelming for your child.

***Reassure your child that you love them and care about them.***

Ally Burr-Harris, Ph.D. Licensed Psychologist

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***Support your child in viewing the adoptive family as their family.*** Refer to the adoptive parents as their mom and dad. Refer to their adoptive siblings as their brother and sister.

***Ask the adoptive parents for guidelines on how your child should address you and your family.***

If you have other children, ask the adoptive parents what they want your children to call them. If you have wishes for how you, your children that you are raising, or your parents (child's birth grandparents) are addressed, let the adoptive parents know your wishes. Ultimately, they will need to be comfortable with your requests, but it's important to let them know your wishes.

***Do not speak negatively about your child's other birth parent to the child if possible.*** Keep in mind that your child will form their identity in part from both birth parents and adoptive parents. If the other birth parent was having significant problems or is considered unsafe, it is okay to share factual information about such difficulties (keeping it developmentally appropriate of course) provided that the adoptive parents are in agreement with this. However, if you also know positive information about the other birth parent, it will help the child to hear this as well. You may be able to share tidbits that are positive such as "He liked to sing...She came from a big family and they really knew how to cook good food...He worked hard in school even though he had a learning disability..."

***Remember that it is not your place to give advice to your child.*** As the birth parent, it is your job to focus on connection...not correction. Let the adoptive parents be the ones to correct behavior when it is needed.

***Build trust by following through with your word.*** If you say you will call, you need to call. If you say you will show up for a visit, show up for the visit. If you say you are going to come to your child's basketball game, go to the game. If you are not sure whether you will be able to come, don't promise. You are trying to build trust and a relationship. This requires consistency and predictability. Contact cannot occur based on when you are feeling sad or missing your child. It has to occur based on predictable patterns/visits and based on the needs of the child at the time. It also needs to come at a time when you are stable, steady, and emotionally ready for the relationship. If there are personal issues such as substance abuse, family problems, or mental health problems that are affecting your stability, it is important to be honest about this with the adoptive parents. It may be that you can have a visit but cannot commit to ongoing contact until a later point in time when you have the stability that you need. Visits may bring up a lot of grief for you. Having an open adoption where you see your child in another family may stir up more feelings than you had expected. It may be tempting to back out of a visit because you find your own emotions overwhelming. Keep in mind, that backing out of a visit will damage trust between you, your child, and their adoptive parents.

Ally Burr-Harris, Ph.D. Licensed Psychologist

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***Be ready to change what visits look like at different developmental stages based on the needs of your child.*** Weekly visits in elementary school years might evolve into monthly dinners and emails, texts, or messages when your birth child is a teen. If your child does not reach out often to you, try to not personalize it or let it hurt your feelings. Remember that it is scary for them and they may also be unsure of what their relationship with you is supposed to “look like.” Also, they are the child and you are the adult. In opening up the adoption, you are reassuring your child that they are loved. Your child may or may not be able to reassure you of this same thing because they are still in the throes of growing up. During the teenage years, youth are focused on their peer relationships and this is developmentally normal. They may resist visits more, and this may not be unique to you. They may also be resisting visits with aunts, uncles, or grandparents in the adoptive family. Try not to take it personally.

***Communicate with adoptive parents in advance about gifts, holidays, traditions, and family events to make sure that your expectations and their expectations are in line with one another.***

***Discuss in advance with adoptive parents how you will handle it if others ask questions (e.g., acquaintances, younger children) during visits as to how all of you go together.*** In other words, do you just explain that you are “extended family in town for a visit” or do you say, “I’m Billy’s birth mother, and this is Billy’s younger brother.”

***When the time is right, reassure your child that the adoption plan was made out of love*** because you were not able to take care of them at that time in your life. If parental rights were terminated against your will, explain to them that the court made this decision. Resist language that makes it sound like adoptive parents “took” them from you. Reassure them that they did nothing wrong and that they are very, very loved. If your child wants to know whether you are sad about not raising them, it is okay to say yes. It is okay to let them know that you think of them often. It is also important to reassure them that you know that you found the right parents for them and that it brings you comfort to see how they are being raised by their adoptive parents. In saying this, I am making an assumption that the adoption plan was a voluntary plan when your child was very young. If circumstances were different (e.g., child was removed by DHS due to abuse, drug exposure, or safety concerns; coercion to make an adoption plan by other family members; child product of rape or incest), I encourage you to first seek professional counsel as to how and when to share such information with a child. Also, it is critical that such information not be shared without the consent of the adoptive parent.

***Remember that you deserve respect and support throughout this journey.*** Make sure that you have people there for you who will lift you up and honor your relationship with your birth child and their adoptive family. You need relationships where you do not feel judged. It is also important for you and your family to feel respected by your child and their adoptive family. If they mess up, say hurtful comments, or fail to consider your feelings, it is important for you to

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stand up for yourself with them. Resist the urge to fade away if it feels too hard. This will only confuse and hurt your child. Instead, find the courage to tell the adoptive parents what is making it hard and to change the visits so that the visits are working for you as well.

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Ally Burr-Harris, Ph.D. Licensed Psychologist  
Children's Program  
[www.childrensprogram.com](http://www.childrensprogram.com)