

Closed Adoption

Authored by
mohammad looti

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1. Core Definition and Characteristics

Closed adoption refers to an adoption arrangement characterized by complete anonymity and confidentiality between the birth parents and the adoptive family. In this traditional model, the identities of the birth parents are withheld from the adoptive parents and the child, and vice versa. The process is typically facilitated by a lawyer or an adoption agency, acting as intermediaries to manage the legal and logistical aspects of the placement. This structure ensures that no contact, communication, or information exchange occurs between the two families involved, both at the time of adoption and throughout the child's upbringing. Historically, this model was often chosen when a birth mother, particularly an unwed one, or a couple felt unable to adequately care for a child, and desired complete separation from the outcome of the adoption.

A defining characteristic of closed adoption is the preparation of a new birth certificate for the child, which lists the adoptive parents as the legal and biological parents. Once a judge officially signs off on the adoption paperwork, the original birth records, along with all associated legal documents pertaining to the adoption, are formally sealed. This legal sealing means that access to these records is severely restricted, often requiring a court order or specific legislative changes for any party to view them. Consequently, a child adopted through a closed process might live their entire life without ever knowing that they were adopted, or without any information regarding their biological origins or birth family. This inherent secrecy forms the fundamental premise upon which closed adoption operates, aiming to provide a clear, unambiguous familial identity for the adopted child within their new family.

2. Historical Context and Evolution

The practice of closed adoption gained significant prominence during the 20th century, particularly in the post-World War II era, and persisted as the dominant form of adoption for several decades. This period was marked by societal norms that often stigmatized out-of-wedlock births, leading to a strong social imperative for discretion and secrecy surrounding such circumstances. Closed adoption offered a solution that allowed birth mothers to place their children without public scrutiny, while adoptive parents were able to integrate a child into their family without the perceived complexities or social judgments associated with the child's biological lineage. The legal mechanisms of sealed records and amended birth certificates were established to reinforce this desired anonymity and to facilitate the complete integration of the adopted child into the adoptive family, aiming to minimize any potential disruption from the birth family.

This historical preference for closed adoptions was deeply embedded in the prevailing

psychological theories of the time, which often suggested that complete severance from the birth family was beneficial for the child's adjustment and attachment to their adoptive parents. It was believed that a clear break would prevent confusion and foster a stronger bond within the new family unit, thereby promoting stability and well-being for the adopted individual. Furthermore, closed adoption served to protect the privacy of all parties involved, particularly birth mothers who sought to move forward with their lives without ongoing reminders or obligations related to the adoption. Thus, for many years, closed adoption was viewed as the most humane and effective approach, reflecting the social and legal paradigms of its era.

3. Legal and Procedural Framework

The legal architecture supporting closed adoption is robust and intentionally designed to enforce anonymity. Upon the birth of the child, the biological parents' rights are legally terminated, either voluntarily or, in some cases, involuntarily through court proceedings. Subsequently, a new birth certificate is issued, replacing the names of the birth parents with those of the adoptive parents, effectively rewriting the child's legal history. This amended birth certificate serves as the primary legal document for the child's identity going forward, reflecting their new family unit. The legal finalization of the adoption, which typically involves a judge's approval, marks the point at which the adoptive parents assume all parental rights and responsibilities.

A critical component of this framework is the sealing of all original adoption records. Once sealed, these records become inaccessible to the public, including the adoptee, the birth parents, and the adoptive parents, without a specific court order. The rationale behind sealing records was historically rooted in protecting the privacy of birth parents and adoptive families, as well as shielding the adopted child from potential complexities or emotional distress associated with their origins. While state laws vary, opening sealed records typically requires demonstrating "good cause" to a court, which is often a high legal bar to meet. This legal mechanism has historically ensured the permanence of the closed adoption arrangement, limiting future contact or revelation of identities.

4. Impact on Adoptees and Birth Families

The impact of closed adoption on adoptees is profound and multifaceted. For a significant portion of their lives, many adoptees in closed arrangements grow up unaware of their adopted status or, if aware, with little to no information about their biological heritage, including ethnic, medical, or genetic backgrounds. This lack of knowledge can sometimes lead to an identity void or a sense of incompleteness, as individuals may grapple with questions about their origins, family resemblances, and medical predispositions without access to the answers. While some adoptees may thrive without ever seeking this information, others report a deep-seated need to understand their roots, a curiosity that can intensify with age, particularly when considering their own health or

starting a family.

For birth parents, particularly birth mothers, closed adoption offered a way to make a life-altering decision and then move forward, sometimes under social pressure or in circumstances of limited resources. However, the complete severance of ties can lead to long-term emotional repercussions, including grief, loss, and a persistent wondering about the child they placed for adoption. The absence of any subsequent contact or information, while intended to facilitate healing and new beginnings, could also create an unresolved psychological space. Similarly, adoptive parents in closed adoptions might navigate their parenting journey without the complexities of co-parenting or ongoing relationships with birth families, but they also forgo the opportunity to gain insights into their child's biological history or to answer questions about origin that their child might eventually pose.

5. Decline in Prevalence and Shifting Paradigms

In the 21st century, the practice of closed adoption has significantly declined in prevalence, giving way to more transparent and open models. This shift reflects broader societal changes, including a decrease in the stigma associated with single parenthood, greater openness about family structures, and an increased emphasis on individual rights and access to personal information. The once-dominant secrecy of closed adoption is now often viewed as potentially detrimental to the well-being and identity development of adoptees, prompting a reevaluation of traditional adoption practices. The rise of new social philosophies prioritizes the adoptee's right to know their origins and the benefits of maintaining some form of connection, even if indirect, with their biological heritage.

This paradigm shift has been significantly influenced by movements led by adoptees themselves, advocating for greater access to their original birth certificates and medical histories. These movements argue that denying individuals access to their own birth records infringes upon their fundamental rights and can have practical consequences, particularly regarding medical care where genetic predispositions are crucial. Furthermore, the legal and social landscape has evolved to support more communicative and collaborative adoption arrangements, recognizing that transparency can foster healthier identities and relationships for all members of the adoption triad-- adoptee, birth family, and adoptive family. This has paved the way for the increasing popularity of open and semi-open adoption models, which contrast sharply with the historical secrecy of closed adoption.

6. Modern Challenges and Alternatives

Despite the legal sealing of records in closed adoptions, modern technological advancements have presented significant challenges to the enduring anonymity that once defined this practice. The

proliferation of direct-to-consumer DNA testing services has created an unforeseen avenue for adoptees to connect with biological relatives, even without access to legal documents. By submitting a DNA sample, adoptees can potentially find matches with birth parents, siblings, or other extended family members who have also used these services. This development has effectively circumvented the legal and social barriers of sealed records, demonstrating that biological connections can often be rediscovered outside of formal legal channels.

The emergence of open adoption as a preferred alternative is a direct response to the limitations and ethical concerns associated with closed adoption. Open adoption models allow for varying degrees of contact and information exchange between birth parents and adoptive families, ranging from occasional updates and letters to regular visits and direct communication. This approach is increasingly favored for its potential to foster a more complete sense of identity for the adoptee, provide reassurance and closure for birth parents, and offer a richer understanding of the child's background for adoptive parents. The shift toward open adoption reflects a collective societal understanding that transparent and communicative relationships, where appropriate, can lead to more positive outcomes for all parties involved in the adoption process.

7. Debates and Ethical Considerations

Closed adoption has been the subject of considerable debate, particularly concerning the ethical implications of permanent secrecy and the rights of adoptees. Critics argue that denying an individual access to their biological identity is a fundamental violation of their human rights, potentially impacting their sense of self, mental health, and medical well-being. The argument often centers on the idea that knowledge of one's origins is a basic human need, and that the state's role in sealing records should not supersede this right. Conversely, proponents historically emphasized the privacy rights of birth parents and adoptive families, arguing that anonymity facilitated healing and the creation of new family units free from interference.

The evolving discourse also highlights the differing perspectives within the adoption triad. While birth parents may have sought anonymity for deeply personal reasons at the time of placement, and adoptive parents may have desired an unambiguous family structure, adoptees frequently express a strong desire for access to their birth stories. This tension between the rights to privacy and the right to know forms the core of ongoing legal and ethical deliberations across jurisdictions. As society progresses, the balance has shifted towards greater transparency, fueled by advocacy groups and a growing recognition of the unique needs and experiences of adoptees in shaping their identities. These debates underscore the complex ethical landscape surrounding adoption practices and the continuous effort to find approaches that best serve the interests of all involved parties, particularly the child.

Further Reading

American Academy of Adoption Attorneys. "Understanding Different Adoption Types."

National Council for Adoption. "The Evolution of Adoption Practices in the 20th and 21st Centuries."

Journal of Family Law. "Sealed Records and Adoptee Rights: A Legal Perspective."

Adoptee Rights Coalition. "The Impact of Secrecy on Adoptee Identity."

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