

Open Adoption

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1. Core Definition

Open adoption represents a distinct form of adoption characterized by varying degrees of direct or indirect contact between the adoptive family and the birth family. Fundamentally, it involves the sharing of personal information and the option for maintaining ongoing personal relationships between both sets of parents and, often, the child. In this arrangement, the adoptive parents retain full legal rights and responsibilities for the child, acting as the child's legal guardians. However, they consciously choose to initiate and maintain contact, to differing extents, with the biological parents and sometimes other birth family members. This proactive decision by the adoptive parents sets the framework for the relationship, which can range from exchanging letters and photos through an intermediary to direct, in-person visits during significant life events such as birthdays, graduations, and holidays like Christmas.

The essence of open adoption lies in its transparency and the recognition of the child's dual heritage. Unlike traditional closed adoptions that emphasize a "clean break" and often involve sealed records, open adoption acknowledges the importance of a child's connection to their biological origins. It seeks to provide the child with a continuous narrative of their life story, allowing them access to information about their birth family and, often, the opportunity to form relationships with them. This approach is rooted in the belief that understanding one's roots and having access to birth family information can contribute positively to an adoptee's identity formation and overall well-being. The specific terms and frequency of contact are typically established through an agreement or understanding prior to or at the time of the adoption, though these arrangements can evolve over time to best suit the child's developmental needs and the families' comfort levels.

2. Etymology and Historical Development

The concept of open adoption, while seemingly modern, has precursors in informal kinship adoptions common before the 20th century, where children were often raised within extended family networks with full knowledge of their birth parents. However, the formal practice of open adoption as a structured alternative to secrecy emerged primarily in the latter half of the 20th century. The early to mid-20th century saw the widespread institutionalization of "closed adoption," which became the dominant model, particularly in Western societies. This model was characterized by anonymity, sealed records, and the complete severance of ties between birth parents and the adopted child. The rationale behind closed adoption included protecting adoptive parents from birth parent interference, shielding the child from potential social stigma, and ensuring a "clean slate" for the new family unit.

However, by the 1970s and 1980s, significant societal shifts began to challenge the closed adoption paradigm. The rise of adoptee rights movements, driven by individuals seeking information about their origins, and birth parent rights groups advocating for acknowledgment and connection, brought the shortcomings of secrecy to the forefront. Concurrently, psychological research started to highlight the potential benefits for adoptees of knowing their biological heritage and understanding their life story, contributing to a sense of identity and reducing feelings of abandonment or confusion. This evolving understanding, coupled with a more nuanced view of family structures and mental health, catalyzed the gradual acceptance and implementation of more open adoption practices. Pioneers in adoption reform began advocating for models that prioritized the child's lifelong need for information and connection, leading to the development of semi-open and fully open arrangements as viable and often preferred options.

The term "open adoption" itself became more prevalent as these practices gained traction, distinguishing them from the "closed" model. Its development reflects a broader societal movement towards greater transparency in family matters, a recognition of the complex emotional landscapes involved in adoption, and a commitment to placing the child's best interests, including their right to identity, at the center of adoption planning. Legislative changes in various jurisdictions also began to support greater access to adoption records and facilitated contact, further solidifying open adoption as a legitimate and increasingly common practice within the field of adoption.

3. Key Characteristics

Open adoption is distinguished by several key characteristics that differentiate it from traditional closed adoptions. Foremost among these is the **degree of openness**, which can vary significantly along a spectrum. At one end is "fully disclosed" or "direct" open adoption, where both families exchange personal identifying information and communicate directly without intermediaries. This can involve regular phone calls, emails, social media interaction, and in-person visits, as exemplified by the original source's mention of periodic visits during birthdays, graduations, and Christmas. This level of openness fosters a direct relationship, allowing the child to form connections with their birth family members over time.

Alternatively, "semi-open" or "mediated" adoption involves the exchange of non-identifying information and communication facilitated through a third party, such as an adoption agency or attorney. In this scenario, letters, photos, and updates are typically routed through the intermediary, allowing for contact without direct personal interaction or knowledge of identifying details. This option provides a middle ground for families who desire some level of connection and information sharing but prefer to maintain a degree of privacy or distance. Regardless of the degree, a crucial characteristic is the establishment of an **agreement or understanding** regarding the nature and frequency of contact. While not always legally binding in every aspect, these agreements serve as a framework for managing expectations and guiding the relationship.

Another defining characteristic is the **flexibility and potential for evolution** within the relationships. Open adoption is not a static arrangement; the needs of the child and the comfort levels of the families can change over time. What begins as mediated contact might evolve into direct contact, or vice-versa, as the child grows and as the families' relationships develop. It is also important to note that while birth parents maintain a relationship with the child, adoptive parents retain all **legal rights and responsibilities** for the child's upbringing, education, and welfare. The contact agreement does not confer legal parental rights upon the birth parents. The entire framework of open adoption is fundamentally **child-centric**, aiming to serve the best interests of the adopted child by providing access to their origins, a comprehensive sense of identity, and potentially additional loving adults in their life.

4. Significance and Impact

The significance and impact of open adoption are profound, affecting adoptees, birth parents, and adoptive parents alike, often leading to more positive outcomes than traditional closed adoption models. For **adoptees**, open adoption can foster a stronger sense of identity and self-esteem. Knowing their birth story and having access to their biological family can alleviate feelings of abandonment, confusion about origins, and the sense of a "missing piece" that many adoptees in closed adoptions experience. It provides a continuous narrative of their life, connecting their past to their present and future, and offers invaluable access to medical history and genetic information, which can be crucial for health planning. This transparency can help children integrate their adoption story into their identity in a healthy way, reducing the need to search for birth family later in life.

For **birth parents**, open adoption often provides a unique opportunity for healing and closure. Knowing their child is safe, loved, and thriving, and having the ability to receive updates or maintain contact, can significantly reduce the grief, regret, and uncertainty often associated with placing a child for adoption. It allows them to witness their child's growth and well-being, providing a sense of peace and assurance that their difficult decision was ultimately beneficial for their child. This ongoing connection can transform the adoption experience from one of loss and separation into a complex but meaningful lifelong relationship, offering a sense of agency and involvement that is absent in closed adoptions.

Adoptive parents also experience considerable benefits from open adoption. Access to the child's medical and genetic history from birth parents is a significant practical advantage, aiding in healthcare decisions. Beyond practicalities, open adoption can foster a deeper understanding of their child's background and temperament, enriching their parenting journey. It also often alleviates the pervasive fear, common in closed adoptions, of a birth parent suddenly reappearing, as the relationship is established and managed proactively. Open adoption demonstrates confidence and security in their role as legal parents, allowing them to openly discuss adoption with their child from

an early age, thereby strengthening trust and communication within the adoptive family. The willingness to embrace open adoption can also be seen as an act of profound love for the child, prioritizing their need for connection and information.

The broader societal impact of open adoption includes a progressive destigmatization of adoption itself. By promoting transparency and acknowledging the complex web of relationships involved, it helps to normalize adoption as a valid and loving way to form a family. It champions a more holistic view of family, recognizing that love and connection can extend beyond traditional nuclear structures. This shift in perspective contributes to a more empathetic and understanding social environment for all members of the adoption constellation, fostering open dialogue and challenging outdated notions of secrecy and shame.

5. Debates and Criticisms

Despite its growing acceptance and numerous documented benefits, open adoption is not without its debates and criticisms. One of the primary concerns revolves around **boundary management**. Establishing and maintaining appropriate boundaries between the adoptive family and the birth family can be challenging. Issues can arise if one party has different expectations about the frequency or nature of contact, or if the initial agreement is not clearly defined or honored. This can lead to misunderstandings, resentment, and emotional strain for all involved, particularly if one family feels their space or role is being overstepped. The evolving nature of these relationships means boundaries often need to be revisited and renegotiated over time, which can be a source of tension.

Another significant criticism centers on the potential for **confusion or conflicting loyalties for the child**. Critics sometimes argue that having multiple sets of "parents" or significant adult figures could confuse a child about who their "real" parents are, or lead to feelings of being caught between two families. This concern is particularly acute if the relationship between the adoptive and birth parents becomes strained or inconsistent. While proponents argue that children are capable of understanding different roles and relationships, the emotional complexity of navigating these dynamics requires careful guidance from adoptive parents to ensure the child feels secure and understood, rather than burdened.

The **emotional complexity** of open adoption is a constant theme in debates. Birth parents may struggle with feelings of grief and loss even while maintaining contact, experiencing renewed sadness after visits. Adoptive parents might grapple with feelings of insecurity, jealousy, or inadequacy, particularly if they perceive a strong bond developing between the child and birth parents. Managing these intense and often conflicting emotions requires a high degree of maturity, empathy, and open communication from all parties. Furthermore, if the agreed-upon contact is disrupted or ceases, it can cause significant distress and a renewed sense of loss for the child and

birth parents, and potentially guilt for the adoptive parents.

Finally, concerns are sometimes raised about **unequal power dynamics** and **privacy issues**. Adoptive parents, by virtue of their legal status, typically hold more power in determining the extent and nature of contact. This imbalance can leave birth parents feeling vulnerable or disempowered if agreements are not upheld or if the relationship shifts. Additionally, the ongoing sharing of personal information and maintaining connections over many years can raise privacy concerns for both families, particularly as children grow into adolescence and adulthood and may have their own preferences regarding contact. These criticisms highlight the need for robust pre-adoption counseling, clear agreements, ongoing support, and open communication to navigate the inherent complexities of open adoption successfully.

Further Reading

[Wikipedia: Open adoption](#)

[Child Welfare Information Gateway: Open Adoption](#)

[Adoption.org: Open Adoption Basics](#)