



Birth Family Relationships

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As adults, we all know where babies come from. Yet, as we parent our adopted children through the sniffles and broken bones and first recitals and first broken hearts, it's easy to forget where our children came from. The "raw material" that God used to create our children came from two living, eternal human beings.

While other chapters in the book deal primarily with the identity issues common to most adoptees, this chapter will focus on the actual relationship with birth family members. There's a difference between knowing information about someone and actually having a relationship with him or her. In our well-connected world, it is more likely than ever that your child will now, or someday in the future, have contact or relationships with the people who brought him into this world.

For starters, modern-day adoption encourages sharing with children from the beginning that they were adopted. This story, however it is told, usually includes the role of the birth mother, and perhaps, other members of the birth family.

A wide array of children's books available today help families make this story come to life. Even if a book portrays a different adoption scenario, it helps your child understand that adoption can happen different ways, with the result of a loving family.

What most books don't address is what it's like to have two different parents with two very different roles (unlike a divorce and/or remarriage family situation).

You may find you are writing you and your child's own story as you go along.

Questions Children Ask

It's normal for your child to be inquisitive about his birth family. After all, the birth parents play an important role in your child's story and what you share about them will make up a large part of his perception of them—and of himself.

From the very beginning, humanize the couple who gave birth to your child. They are a man and woman made in God's image—not vague, faceless entities. The respect you show for each birth parent's intrinsic value and humanity will boost your child's own self-respect.

As your child matures, likely the makeup of her questions will change as well. Answering these key questions in an empathetic and supportive way is important—even if your child doesn't ask them out loud.

Why didn't my mother keep me?

In some adoptions, the child's birth mother or birth family may have written a letter explaining the circumstances surrounding the child's birth and the love that went into the adoption decision and placement into the adoptive family. These words from the heart of the birth family may be able to answer the child's curiosity and longing better than any perspective the adoptive parents can give.

But for many adoptive parents, this question is difficult, if not impossible, to answer. The adoption was closed or the facts were never disclosed. Unless there is an extensive search, a real relationship is not possible. Ongoing honesty and sensitivity are key as your child learns more about his past and as you address his feelings of loss. Share openly the facts that are known, being considerate of age-appropriate details. Photographs and written records make the subject approachable and more natural to discuss.



Remember—just because you have an answer to this question doesn't mean that your child won't still struggle with the facts and feelings of abandonment and loss. What counts most is your very present love and support as he goes through these difficult times.

Where is my birth mother/birth father now?

Perhaps you will tell your child that someday you will help her look for her birth parents. As a believer in an omniscient, loving God, you can assure your child that God knows where her birth parents are and that He is caring for them just as He cares for your child. You and your child can pray for these people, trusting God to do good in their lives as a result.

Will you always be there for me—even when I have an interest in learning more about myself and my background, or when I am sorting out my feelings about being an adopted child?

The answer should always be, "Yes!"

As an adopted child matures and learns more about her history, she begins to realize that adoption means one family surrendering custody to another. This may translate into a subconscious or overt concern that the adoptive parents, too, may someday abandon her. Children of any age (even young adults) may fear triggering abandonment if they show interest in or pursue a relationship with members of their birth family. Don't ever assume that you have assured your child enough of your commitment to her—even if she doesn't verbalize her concerns.

If your communication about the birth family has been open from the beginning, you have a greater potential for growth and bonding as the child explores more about his biological background. Remain steadfast and secure that you are the child's parents, and that a child searching his own feelings and sense of self and history does not threaten family status.

A child wants to know that he can still rely on the parents he has known, the adoptive parents, for love, support, and encouragement as he learns more about himself. Simply because a child has an interest in his biological past does not mean he doesn't recognize the primary relationship and role of his adoptive parents.

How will I know how to prevent behaviors or health issues without my full medical history?

Access to medical history may be a concern with an adopted child. The existence and availability of medical records may vary depending on the circumstances around the child's adoption and medical history. Seek out as much information as you possibly can.

Make sure your child's doctor is conscious of the child's adoptive history and is sensitive to the child's concerns. A good doctor will be willing to alleviate a child's fears by answering any questions and thoroughly explaining all diagnoses and procedures.

Encourage healthy living as you parent your child. If your child, particularly as a teenager, is concerned about his medical history, have his doctor explain all the choices and precautions that can lower his genetic risk.

Do I need to have a relationship with my birth family?

Adoptive parents may feel their child needs to develop a relationship with the birth family as part of her emotional well-being. However, not all adopted children have a felt need to know their birth family intimately. Adoptive parents can be



attentive to their child's wishes, and still remain open to the possibility of a relationship, should the child's needs change.

Of course, in many cases it is not safe or wise for the child to have a close relationship with her birth family. Determining the extent of the contact and emotional connection is your role as a parent, but the key should be what is best for your child, not just what is convenient or comfortable for you.

There may come a day when your child is a teen that he will begin to make his own decisions about staying in touch with his birth family. While this may be painful for you and the birth family, exploring or ignoring these relationships are a normal part of the maturation process. It may fall on you to explain to members of his birth family that he does not wish to communicate further with them at this time. Be honest with them, and share that this is a common phase.

Options and Successful Strategies

What if the decision has been made, perhaps by a judge, that your child will be in contact with his or her birth family?

The most common means of contact is the exchange of letters and photos. The adoptive family sends updated letters and information to the birth family either directly or through their adoption professional. At times, the birth family may also send photos or news of their own in return. This can be an important opportunity for your child to experience two-way communication, to receive answers to questions only the birth family can answer, or even to simply build the foundation of a relationship.

With easy access to technology, contact has now jumped to cyberspace as well. E-mailing photos or sending links to online photo albums are easy ways to stay in touch. Some adoptive families have set up a private area at MySpace.com or MySpaceAdoption.com to post photos and updates, giving access only to members of the birth family. If your birth family is Internet savvy, there are many ways in which you can keep in touch without much effort.

It is important to understand why birth families want contact. While some are hoping to watch the child grow or to ensure that you are good parents, the reality is more likely that they are simply looking for the reassurance that they made the right decision. Birth grandparents who desire to stay in contact likely feel like most grandparents do. Be sensitive to the deep feelings that grandparents have for their grandchildren. If appropriate, encouraging this connection will provide more people who love your child, thus giving her the reassurance and sense of history that she is seeking.

Requests for visits with the child by birth families are on the rise. Often this is something that adoptive families fear or may be suspicious of. Rest assured that visits in adoption are not the same as visitation awarded in a divorce. A visit with a birth mother or other member of the birth family takes place with the adoptive family present; the child is not left alone unless the parent plans for it. Often visits are planned at public places, like parks or restaurants, where there is the opportunity for the child to engage in normal activities, giving the birth family the opportunity to see how happy and healthy your child is.

Your commitment to ongoing contact may have been one of the things that initially attracted a birth family to you. It is vital that you honor the commitment you have made to the birth family to the best of your ability.



For more information please consider visiting OpenAdoption.com.

Dealing with Feelings, Fears, and Fantasies

Adoptive parents and children alike can have a mixture of feelings, fears, and sometimes fantasies about birth families.

Adoptive parents often have strong concerns about ongoing contact with their child's birth mother or father. Common fears include:

- Child will be confused.
- Child will be endangered.
- Child will be kidnapped.
- Child will state a preference to be with birth parent(s).
- Birth parent(s) will inform the child they didn't want the adoption.

The best way you can reassure yourself and put some of your fears to rest is simply by remembering that your adoption is final. The birth family may or may not wish that things have changed permanently, but they have.

Don't forget that children can be easily confused about many things in life. They often need facts and stories repeated several times before they really "get it." If, from the beginning, you explain your child's adoption story and the role that her birth family plays in it, she will not be confused. Many children who must deal with divorce or difficult family circumstances do so without being unnecessarily confused. The key factor is your steady parenting and loving reassurance.

If you stay with your child during visits and stay involved with other contact, your child will be more secure. Of course, you do not have to allow visits with any family members who may pose a threat to your child. Anyone with a criminal record or history of mental illness should be excluded from, or at least carefully monitored, during visitation.

Your child indeed may state a preference for his birth family—especially when he's mad at you! Keep a sense of humor and save your reaction for his real concerns. Your child knows who his parents are. He knows that you love him. He also needs to know that he has a birth family that is a part of him. If his questions are answered, he will be satisfied, and know that his birth family, whatever relationship they have, is made up of more individuals who care about him.

People are unpredictable. A birth parent may say something unkind or damaging. If this happens, talk it through with your child. Listen well, assuring her of the truth of the situation and of your commitment to her. As well, make it clear to the birth parent that you cannot allow contact if your child is at risk for emotional harm.

Of course, many adopted children fantasize about their birth family if they know few facts about them. Without solid information, a child is left to fill that lack of information with fantasies about how wonderful they are. A child may even create imaginary friends who play a role in this fantasy adoption story. Common fantasies include:

- Birth family will return someday to "rescue" them.
- Birth mother is a princess, singer, or famous actress.
- Birth family didn't want them.



Beginning with the truth minimizes the opportunity for a child to fantasize. If they know the truth, or at least the basic facts, any fantasy may be closer to the truth. This is one of the reasons it is vital to begin sharing your child's adoption story from the very beginning. If a child knows their story, there simply isn't the need to fantasize about it.

Since fantasy is also a natural part of childhood, providing the reality alongside the fantasy will ensure that fantasy isn't taken into adulthood as fact.

Adult adoptees who did not know their birth families may need to have face-to-face contact with their birth family to put to rest their inner fantasies.

Longing for One's Birth Family

If your child does not have an open adoption with known birth parents, or if you have lost touch with the birth family, there may come a day when your child expresses interest in searching for them and reuniting. First and foremost, remember that this is not necessarily a rejection of you. This is not in response to something you did not provide.

We all have an innate need to know who we are and where we came from. Your child's birth family is part of who he is and where he came from. Different adoptees feel differently about this, and supporting his desire will show your child that you support him. Granted, this may be hard to do, but remember, your child will only benefit from learning more about his birth family's health and medical history, as well as any other genetic information he can gather.

Elly's adoption was closed. At 22, she was newly married and eager to start a family but, as she'd experienced all her life, she had to complete the doctor's forms with "unknown" in every box asking about her family's health history. She had contacted her adoption agency and indicated that she would be open to reuniting with her birth mother, but the agency had never heard from the birth mother. Searching was an option, but Elly just didn't know if she wanted to take it that far.

When Elly was six months pregnant, she got a call out of the blue from the adoption agency, informing her that her birth mother had contacted them and was interested in speaking with Elly. Later that evening, they spoke on the phone for the first time, her birth mother eagerly answering endless medical questions that Elly could share with her doctor.

Sharon, Elly's adopted mother, took the news a bit differently. Suddenly she had visions of this "stranger" being there when Elly delivered, trying to play grandmother, and only "showing up" when all the work was done. Through tears and prayer, Elly and Sharon came to understand each other's positions, and were able to embrace each other's need for reassurance that their bond would always come first.

Encourage your child to include you in her search should she ever pursue it. Embracing the need for a history and a heritage will strengthen the relationship the two of you have and convey that adoption is, indeed, a miraculous gift.

Assure your child that your love and commitment is unconditional—no matter how the birth family responds to her contact with them. If she encounters rejection, she will need your relationship more than ever. You can encourage her



to separate negativity and the issues of the birth parent from her own self as a person, but mostly you can pray and grieve with her over another rejection and loss.

Before that day comes, instill in your child her value as a unique individual, created by God in the womb of another, but capable and responsible before Him as is each human being.

God's Message about Family Relationships

As followers of Jesus Christ, it is important to embrace others with God's love, even when it may be difficult. Certainly embracing your child's birth family may come with hesitation. After all, you have adopted your child—not the whole birth family!

Yet God tells us we are to love others, and in doing so, to demonstrate His love for them. He clearly tells us, "We love because he first loved us. If anyone says, 'I love God,' yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen. And he has given us this command: Whoever loves God must also love his brother." (1 John 4:19-21)

Through prayer for love and guidance you can learn to embrace your child's birth family in a manner that benefits your child, honors your role as her parents, and treats her birth family with respect. Your understanding and acceptance of the situation allows you to fully appreciate God's design for your family.

Appreciate the precious gift of parenthood granted to you by your child's birth family by embracing them through the love of Jesus Christ.

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