

FATHERS, FAMILIES, AND FRIENDS: *Involving and Prioritizing a Pregnant Client's Support System*

*By Ashley Morris†
With Chuck Johnson and Megan Lindsey*

Many of us remember the recent story of Casey Anthony, who was charged with killing her two-year-old daughter Caylee in 2008. At the time, news reports revealed that Anthony, a new mother, at first considered placing her daughter for adoption, but Anthony's mother discouraged her from making an adoption plan.

This story is not shared in an attempt to fully explain this tragedy, but to illustrate the influence that a woman's support system has on the difficult decisions she faces regarding her unintended pregnancy. Even if she believes that adoption may be the right choice for her and her child, relational barriers may prevent a woman from making her own fully informed decision, free from outside pressure or coercion.

Women regularly turn to family and close friends when facing unintended pregnancy. A 2005 survey conducted by Spaulding for Children reported the top four groups of people that women listed feeling most comfortable talking to about their unintended pregnancies: friends; boyfriends, husbands, or partners; family members; and social

workers and counselors. If a woman feels that adoption may be in her best interest as well as that of her child, then social workers should prioritize examining, educating, and supporting the relationships she values most in order to give her the opportunity to fully consider her options.

Stanton Phillips, a Virginia adoption attorney, recalls a case in which a pending adoption was adamantly opposed by the child's paternal grandmother. Phillips counseled both the father and grandmother to meet the potential adoptive parents, and after the meeting, both were convinced that adoption was the best option for the child.

Paulette Holloway, a social worker who has served as director of an adoption agency in Maryland for the past fifteen years, can also attest to the strong influence of birth grandparents. Holloway is currently working with a 21-year-old mother who decided to make an adoption plan for her newborn baby. The mother was set on her decision, as was the baby's father, but the baby's maternal grandmother became quite hostile when she learned of her daughter's plan. Holloway

†Ashley Morris interned at the National Council For Adoption from September 2010 through April 2011 while pursuing her Master's degree in Social Work at the Catholic University of America.

Adoption Advocate

worked with the biological mother as well as her mother to establish an adoption plan. While the grandmother's opinion on making an adoption plan did soften, she persisted in buying baby clothes. Meanwhile, one of the mother's friends, who was pregnant herself, expressed disgust with her friend for considering adoption.

Friends and family can exercise enormous influence over an expectant mother. Although counselors seek to inform and empower biological parents to make their own decisions, we know that there are many relational factors that may have an impact on their choices. Examining, educating, and supporting the people with whom they have important relationships is one way to extend the support provided to clients.

Given the magnitude of an adoption decision, it is important to include the mother's support system in the adoption process to the greatest extent possible. It would be difficult for a woman to have a healthy relationship with her mother if her mother remained bitter about the adoption placement of her grandchild. It would be equally difficult for a woman to receive needed support from a friend if that friend felt that the adoption decision was a huge mistake. Any judgment by the people she cares most about in life can be detrimental to a woman's ability to make her own decision.

Says Chuck Johnson, President and CEO of the National Council For Adoption and former adoption agency director and counselor, "It is always the goal of a good counselor to leave the relationships that are important to the birthmother in better shape than we found them." A pregnant client is more likely to have a good outcome if she is fully informed about the consequences related to whichever option she chooses. Paulette Holloway's agency attempts to prepare pregnant clients for the possible relational repercussions of choosing adoption, but also makes it a priority to educate those within the pregnant client's support system so that they can provide support to her as

she weighs her decision.

Family members and friends are not the only potential influences on a woman considering adoption; the relationship she has with the father of her child is, in many cases, extremely important to her decision. Before 1972, unwed fathers' parental rights, if recognized at all, were recognized inconsistently and were unequal to those of the mother. After the 1972 Stanley vs. Illinois Supreme Court decision, unwed fathers gained rights to their children. As an unintended result of this decision, a number of adoptions were disrupted as fathers began to exercise their lawful rights. Paulette estimates that at least 50 percent of the women her local agency counseled in 2010 ultimately chose not make adoption plans for their children because the fathers opposed the decision.

Though laws vary from state to state, most states require fathers to be notified when adoption plans are pending for their children. There are important benefits brought to the table by a participating birthfather; to include him is not only necessary to comply with the law, it can also make

the adoption process smoother and more beneficial to the birthmother and child. If the father consents, he has the opportunity to be involved with the adoption planning and he cannot later disrupt or challenge the adoption. The child's full medical history can then be made available to his adoptive parents. Also, the child has the opportunity to know that both birthparents loved and wanted what was best for him, and made the best decision they could to ensure that.

Because of the importance of fathers' rights and responsibilities, the National Council For Adoption supports the creation of a National Putative Father Registry, which would help adoption professionals locate men who want to be notified of their child's impending placement. Potential or putative fathers would register in their states, which could then in turn submit their information to the national registry, preventing con-

Given the magnitude of an adoption decision, it is important to include the mother's support system in the adoption process to the greatest extent possible.



Adoption Advocate

flicts that often arise when a pregnant woman moves or gives birth in a different state. (For more information about the National Putative Father Registry, please refer to NCFA's *Adoption Advocate* 14, "On the Benefits of a National Putative Father Registry," found online at <https://www.adoptioncouncil.org/publications/adoption-advocate-no14.html>.)

Attorney Stanton Phillips recalls being retained by a father to contest an adoption. He agreed to take the case only if the father agreed to meet with the prospective adoptive parents without the presence of lawyers. The father agreed, and subsequently decided that the adoptive parents were good people who would ensure his child was cared for and loved. Both Phillips and Holloway believe that only a small minority of fathers adamantly oppose adoption in all cases, but the majority of fathers have instinctive negative reactions when they hear of potential adoption plans for their children. Often, they have been left out of the planning and are expected to arrive at the same conclusion as the expectant mother without benefit of the process. When fathers are fully informed about adoption and their opinions included and valued, many will ultimately support making an adoption plan for their child.

Firefighter and restaurateur Darryl Green understands the desire many birthfathers have to see their children in happy homes. Twenty-one years ago, a woman with whom he had a short-term relationship found out that she was pregnant. She was parenting two other children, and had chosen adoption for their child. Initially, she told Green that he was not the father, but he remained supportive throughout her pregnancy, and two weeks before the birth she finally revealed to him that he was the father.

At the time, Green was involved in another legal case, and was advised not to pursue custody of the child. Initially he tried to avoid the social worker that contacted him, but when she found

him, he gave her his side of the story. Now, in retrospect, he praises her persistence in seeking him out and listening to him. When Green learned that the birthmother had given birth to their daughter, he went to see the baby at the hospital. She was crying relentlessly and wouldn't eat, but after he held and soothed her, she settled down and ate and slept. At that point, Green realized that he was not ready for the responsibility of raising her, and felt that, rather than "giving her up" for adoption, he was giving her a chance at a better life than he could provide.

Darryl Green now runs a restaurant in Washington, DC, and has a 15-year-old daughter and nine-year-old son that he is parenting. He often gives presentations alongside the social worker that facilitated the adoption of his daughter 18 years ago. Almost every year, Green speaks on a panel at the Barker Foundation, an adoption agency and counseling center.

He laments that many people don't recognize the connection that birthfathers have with their children. "Fathers get a bad rap," he says. "They're thought of as getting away with something, when, if given the chance, they would like to raise their children. Even when

fathers agree to adoption, they feel good about selecting what they consider to be a good parental unit for their child."

Green firmly believes in adoption as a positive option. He is planning to adopt his 13-year-old godson, who has lived with him since he was born. But Green stresses the importance of involving fathers when adoption is being considered. He knows many women who have given children to their fathers for rearing. "Birthfathers need to be involved in adoption," he says. "A father's role is just as important as the mother's."

It is true that some fathers, unlike Darryl Green, may not support adoption yet remain unwilling to participate in parenting the child, and laws in every state provide ways to handle this situation on a case-by-case basis. However, profes-

"It is always the goal of a good counselor to leave the relationships that are important to the birthmother in better shape than we found them."

—Chuck Johnson



Adoption Advocate

sionals must take care not to assume this is the position of all expectant fathers. Paulette Holloway recommends engaging fathers and making them feel empowered, choosing statements such as “We know you want to raise your child” or “We know that it is important for you to be involved in decisions regarding your child.” She notes how some adoption agencies staffed mainly by women counselors are now contracting male social workers specifically for the purpose of reaching out to expectant fathers and engaging them in the process.

As for the family members and friends of the pregnant client, social workers need to educate them with compassion. “They must know that no one is trying to snatch babies,” says Holloway, who was accused of this by the mother of her 21-year-old client. Ultimately, friends have no legal right to challenge an adoption decision; nor do family members, with very few exceptions (in a limited number of states, a pregnant minor must have parental consent or a judicial override of that consent to make an adoption plan for her child). However, family and friends have a great and undeniable influence on a woman’s decision and the potential for a long-term role in the child’s life.

Even if a pregnant client ultimately decides not to make an adoption plan, she is in the best position to face whatever decision she does make if she – and those people supporting her – are given the most information possible. If adoption is the best choice, both birthparents will be better able to live with their decision when surrounded by friends and family who are educated about adoption and prepared to give them needed support during the decision-making process – and beyond.

NCFA recommends the following best practices for adoption professionals:

1. **Assist the pregnant client in expressing her intent to loved ones.** Help the preg-

nant woman share with loved ones her intention to make an adoption plan. She needs to understand that it will be helpful for those around her to be aware of her plan, so they can be a source of support. A simple resource such as a brochure designed to explain to friends and family why many birthmothers choose to make an adoption plan can be a useful tool in helping a pregnant woman begin this conversation with the father, her friends, and her family.

2. **Involve fathers as early as possible.** Adoption professionals confirm the importance of involving the child’s father as early as possible. Give him the same level of respect and caring that you offer the pregnant client.
3. **Involve family and friends as early as possible.** Don’t wait to involve the people your client wants to include in the adoption process. This will give you time to help them voice issues and resolve potential conflicts before the baby’s birth. Early involvement will allow all parties to discuss the impact that the adoption decision has on them. Give both parents some counsel before involving family and friends, however, so they are prepared to deal with common first reactions when announcing an adoption plan.
4. **Educate family and friends to help create a positive support system.** Find out which people the pregnant client wants involved in the process, and try to help them create an atmosphere of support for her. The support offered by family and friends during the pregnancy and adoption process is just as important after birth and finalization. Educating family and friends and helping them understand the complexity of an adoption decision and the value of their continued support will create a

Both birthparents will be better able to live with their decision when surrounded by friends and family who are educated about adoption and prepared to give them needed support during the decision-making process — and beyond.



Adoption Advocate

healthier environment for the birthmother to process her decision. Often the birthmother's mother, in particular, can be a great ally, and may heavily influence her choice.

5. **Assign family and friends a separate counselor.** If the pregnant client allows, assign her family and friends to a separate counselor to assist them with their struggles and concerns and answer any questions that may arise. Make sure to protect the client's confidentiality, however, by using a HIPAA-compliant release if any of her information is to be shared.
6. **Connect fathers to supportive resources.** Help the child's father connect with a support group for birthfathers, or link him to another birthfather who has been through the adoption process.
7. **Present father with post-placement options.** Inform the expectant father of options such as writing letters to his child, receiving pictures, or maintaining other forms of contact. This helps him feel important and involved, and may also help him feel secure in the adoption decision.
8. **Help potential birthparents to improve their own relationships.** Think about how you can help to strengthen birthparents' familial relationships and friendships. This is particularly important if a birthparent faces opposition from family and friends over the adoption. Unfortunately, some people may persist in believing that adoption agencies are interested in placing an infant at the expense of helping birthparents. Challenge those beliefs through good counsel and practice, even if other outreach efforts fail.
9. **Help pregnant clients to keep a realistic view of promises.** If family and friends opposed to her adoption plan offer a woman fanciful or unrealistic promises of help, urge her to "reality check" their plans. For example, if a family member tells her to keep the child and promises to help her if she does, the counselor can encourage her to clarify exactly what is meant by "help." What someone means when they offer to help and the support a woman actually needs or expects may be two very different things. Clear communication is key to ensuring that the mother is not surprised or disappointed later.
10. **Have pre-placement meetings with key stakeholders.** Arrange a pre-placement visit with all members of both parents' support systems to prepare them for placement and post-placement procedures and issues. At this meeting, which should take place at least a few weeks prior to placement, discuss their expectations and work diligently to address any issues that may remain. If possible, include the adoptive parents at this meeting.



Adoption Advocate

Editor's Note

NCFCA thanks the following individuals for sharing their professional expertise:

Stanton Phillips, Adoption Legal Services, Virginia
Kris Faasse, Bethany Christian Services, Michigan
Paulette Holloway, Bethany Christian Services, Maryland
Victory Allan, Nightlight Christian Adoptions, California
Terri Maikkula, Adoption by Shepherd Care, Florida
James Wadman, LDS Family Services, Utah
Merilee Meacham, LDS Family Services, Maryland
Joe Daines, LDS Family Services, Oregon

HELP US FUND THE *ADOPTION ADVOCATE*

National Council For Adoption is a non-profit organization supported by charitable donations. To maintain our outstanding programs, we accept contributions of every size. To make a contribution, please go to www.adoptioncouncil.org and click on "Contribute" or mail your check to NCFCA, 225 N. Washington Street, Alexandria, VA 22314. Thank you!

