

40 | The Jury Is In Regarding Adoption Openness

By Thomas C. Atwood[†]

Since the trend toward greater openness in adoptive placements began 25 to 30 years ago, some adoption advocates and practitioners have questioned the wisdom of ongoing birthmother visits with the family and the exchange of identifying information between birthparents and adoptive families. Other adoption proponents have advocated that fully open adoptions should be the norm. Advocates of both these opposing perspectives have felt they were serving the best interests of children.

Today, there is relatively little controversy over such openness practices as: birthparent involvement in the selection of the adoptive parents; one or two meetings between birthmother and adoptive parents before and/or at placement; and letters and photographs for agreed-upon time periods following placement. A minority of placements include ongoing visits and the exchange of identifying information.

Since the mid-1980s, Professors Harold Grotevant (University of Minnesota) and Ruth McRoy (University of Texas at Austin) have conducted longitudinal studies of 190 adoptive families and 169 birthmothers, examining the impact of ongoing contact between birthmothers and adopted children and their families. Until recently, their research has been inconclusive regarding the optimum level of openness

in adoptive placements. But now, Professors Grotevant and McRoy have published, with Yvette Perry, a finding on this issue that the adoption community has long been waiting for in *Psychological Issues in Adoption: Research and Practice*, edited by David Brodzinsky and Jesus Palacios. This article is reprinted in NCFAs *Adoption Factbook IV*.

In the article, the authors conclude from their research that a “one-size-fits-all approach” regarding “the desirability and undesirability of fully disclosed or confidential adoptions . . . is not warranted. . . . [T]he development of adoptive identity is quite varied, depending on individuals, families, and aspects of the kinship network. . . . But . . . this variation does not appear to be significantly dependent on level of openness.”

Let’s say that again, to appreciate the significance of this conclusion. Leading researchers in the field of adoption openness have concluded that the level of openness in an adoption placement does not significantly affect the development of adoptive identity, and that, therefore, a universally optimum policy regarding openness cannot be recommended, nor should one be imposed.

This finding may surprise many, but it is completely consistent with NCFAs long held position that issues of openness and privacy in adoption should be resolved by the principle of mutual consent, not “one-size-fits-all.” Because views regarding adoption openness are so diverse and personal among parties to adoption, NCFAs long argued that adoption-openness policies should be resolved on the basis of consent, not coercion or ideology.

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To be clear, NCFA does not oppose mutually consensual openness, in either adoption placements or records. What we oppose, and will continue to oppose, is any law that unconditionally empowers one party to adoption to force contact or the release of identifying information, without the consent of the other party to adoption.

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Driven especially by the evolution in birthmothers' decisions, the issue of openness in adoptive placements may have arrived at some level of equilibrium. Birthparents and adoptive parents are making agreements regarding the degree of openness. Most agencies and attorneys allow birthmothers the option of ongoing visits, but most birthmothers do not choose that much openness. Adoptive parents can state the level of openness they are willing to accept, but some agencies report that choosing confi-

dential adoption can make longer the wait for an infant placement. Preference for a confidential adoption leads some adoptive parents to adopt internationally.

The heated debate over openness in adoption records continues in some state legislatures. But since the "open-records" movement began, only five states have enacted this harmful policy. NCFA has always opposed the unilateral, coercive, and "one-size-fits-all" nature of these proposals. Three-quarters of the states still require birthparent consent for the release of their identifying information. In the last five years, at least 15 states have considered more than 30 pieces of mandatory-openness legislation. Only one state approved the measure, and then, by only a one-vote margin.

Openness need not be the divisive issue it has long been within the adoption community. Hopefully, the above finding will put to rest the one-size-fits-all approach taken by some openness advocates. After decades of contentious debate, we urge the adoption community to unite around the humane principle of mutual consent, both for placements and records.