



# DOMESTIC AGENCY PROGRAM INFO

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## Tip #1

Grab a Pen & some Paper to Write Down your ?'s as they enter your



# We appreciate you wanting to know something about us...

Adoption Services, Inc. is a private, non-profit child placing agency licensed by the State of Wisconsin with offices in Appleton and the Greater Milwaukee area.

The heart of our adoption programs at Adoption Services is our concern for our birthparents wrestling with the difficulties of an untimely pregnancy, and our hopeful adoptive parents struggling with the heartache of infertility. Our first priority to our clients is to assist them to reach a thoroughly considered decision for themselves and their children.

Adoption counseling is a difficult and fragile process. It is never easy for birthparents to make the sacrificial decision to terminate parental rights for the best interest of their children. It is never easy for hopeful adoptive parents to be unsure of the circumstances that may materialize to make their adoption dream come true. It is never easy for the adoption workers to balance the needs and requests of our clients and to maintain some boundaries for privacy in their lives beyond the demands of the client caseload. However, when the miraculous process of adoption is nurtured well, by ALL persons involved, profound joy can result for everyone, even the birthparents. Adoption is not without risks, but for those with commitment to adoption, there is much to gain.

Adoption makes clear something that is true in all life - we are interdependent of one another. It is imperative that we create an environment for positive decision making, made in partnership with one another. Without the security of knowing that adoption will provide the child with a hoped for future the birthparents know they cannot provide, an adoption decision will never be made.

Our agency is a small one. We pride ourselves on being able to provide personal and individual attention to our clients. The number of birthmothers seeking to place children through agencies never equals the number of waiting parents. Since our agency is small, our list of waiting parents is not extensive. However, prospective adoptive parents should expect a waiting period which can vary widely.

For any adoption in the State of Wisconsin, the prospective parents must have a current approved home study and there must be a child placing agency willing to accept guardianship of the child and to provide post-placement supervision. Our agency provides these services, as well as assisting in International adoptions, Independent adoptions, Step-parent, and Relative adoptions.

*Many good wishes on your adoption journey.*

  
Angie Brunhart, MSW, CPSW  
Agency Director

## Adoption Creed

Not Flesh of My Flesh  
Nor Bone of My Bone  
But Still Miraculously  
My Own

Never Forget  
For One Single Minute  
You Didn't Grow  
Under My Heart  
But In It.

## OUR MISSION

To build families through adoption, by providing supportive services to all members of the adoption triad during and after placement, resulting in permanent homes for children and extended family relationships.

## OUR PHILOSOPHY

Adoption Services believes every child has a right to be unconditionally accepted as a permanent member of a family and that adoption is a lifetime commitment.

Being cognizant of the many unique issues to forming adoptive families, Adoption Services' commitment to the birthparents, family and child will not end with the finalization.

Adoption Services believes the needs of the child are the first priority in any adoption plan.

## OUR OFFICES AND ONLINE SPACES

### Appleton and Northern Wisconsin

2439 S. Oneida Street, Appleton, WI 54915

Office Phone: 920-735-6750

Toll Free: 888-982-3678

### Milwaukee and Southern Wisconsin

5215 N. Ironwood Road, Suite 201, Glendale, WI 53217

Office Phone: 414-332-1800

Toll Free: 888-982-3678

### Online Spaces

Website: [www.AdoptionServicesInc.com](http://www.AdoptionServicesInc.com)

Facebook: [@optionservicesinc](https://www.facebook.com/adoptionservicesinc) or [www.facebook.com/adoptionservicesinc](http://www.facebook.com/adoptionservicesinc)

Instagram: [@optionservicesinc](https://www.instagram.com/adoptionservicesinc)

## HOME STUDY PROCESS

Adoption Services understands that for many people the home study process may seem overwhelming. To better prepare you for what's to come, we have prepared a list of the different documents Adoption Services must retain in order to complete your home study. In addition to these documents, you will also be required to fill out and return specific Adoption Services forms. These forms request information about your financial status, health/medical checks, and criminal and caregiver checks. You will also submit an application, and a written autobiography (one per spouse).

Please review the following list. If you have questions regarding our retention of these documents, please call for clarification or to speak with a social worker.

### Documents needed prior to home study meetings: *(Copies are acceptable for all documents listed)*

- Marriage certificate
- Birth certificates for all household members
- Latest W-2 or 1040 tax form
- Declaration page of vehicle insurance
- Declaration page of homeowner/renter's insurance
- Furnace inspection results
- Divorce or death certificates (if applicable)
- Military discharge papers (if applicable)
- Proof of pet vaccination (if applicable)
- Firearm make, model, serial # (if applicable)
- Well water test results (if applicable)
- Wood burning stove inspection (if applicable)
- Pre-Adoption Education (if applicable)

### The home study interviews consist of:

1. A joint meeting with the adoptive couple (or the single person)
2. An individual meeting with each spouse (2nd meeting for individuals)
3. A home visit which includes all household members

### Adoption Services, Inc. will request records for all household members (16 years and older) from the following agencies:

1. Local Police and Sheriff's Departments
2. Crime Information Bureau
3. Fingerprints
4. State and County Department of Health & Human Services
5. Caregiver's and Department of Justice Background check
6. Wisconsin Department of Transportation
7. Therapy/Counseling Summary (if applicable)
9. Medical/Physical Health Summary (if applicable)

*(If you have moved within the past 5 years, we will need to obtain out of state records. We can help with this but there will be additional forms and possibly fees.)*

### Pre-Adoptive Education:

As required by the State of Wisconsin, all first-time adoptions will require adoptive parents to complete 30 hours of adoption education prior to completing their home study. We will provide you with the materials and sources to complete this.

## KEEP IN MIND ADOPTION IS A JOURNEY, NOT A DESTINATION

Adoption is a lot more than just "getting" a child. It is a journey that brings together two families. Like any journey you need to plan but don't expect to reach your destination without a few long, winding, difficult, and trying bumps in the road. Along the way you may ask yourself, "How am I going to do this?". Never forget that with a little resilience, strength, courage, and appreciation this journey will lead you to the greatest love of all... the love of a child.

## WHERE TO START

We understand that there are many questions that you have right now. Whether you are excited, stressed, overwhelmed or all of the above

Take a deep breath and read on

In Wisconsin, every adoption begins with a Home Study, and with that a lot of paperwork! Part of our job is to ensure that you are able to provide for a child in many different ways. This means we need proof and confirmation of everything.

**adoption**

[ a- dop-tion ] noun

1. Another word for love

# WHAT TO EXPECT

The first thing you can expect when adopting is a lot of paper work! Part of our job is to ensure that you are able to provide for a child. This means we need proof and confirmation of everything! The following is a list of the steps we usually follow to get you through the adoption process.

1. After you have contacted us and decided on the type of adoption you would like to pursue, we will send you an application. This application asks for general personal information about you, your spouse, your marriage, your children (if any), your education, your job, and your intentions with adoption. This form also asks you to give us a list of five people who are willing to act as your references.

The application must be submitted along with copies of birth certificates, marriage license, divorce decree(s), proof of auto and homeowner's insurance, most recent W-2, pet vaccinations, military discharge, and a recent picture of you. We also request that at this time you sign the agency agreement and other related forms acknowledging our requirements.

2. After this, we will start to process your application. If there are any questions, or if we anticipate a problem, we will call you. In the meantime, you continue to round up all the documents we need. A physical will need to be done, and a medical report submitted, along with health insurance verification. You will also need to start on your autobiography.

We continue to process the application, accessing reference checks, protective services checks, crime bureau checks, police checks, and driver's record checks.

The State of Wisconsin requires 30 hours of adoption education. We will provide the materials and resources for you to begin to work on your education, which needs to be finished prior to the completion of the home study.

3. At this point, a social worker will be assigned your case, and will call to arrange your home study meetings with you. There are typically three meetings for a home study, and the process goes fairly quickly once you start. Generally we like to schedule one meeting a week, and after the last meeting you can expect to get a rough draft of the study in one to two weeks.

4. The first home study meeting usually takes place at the office and requires both individuals (if a couple) to be present. This meeting is to find out what you think about adoption. What are you hoping for and expecting from adoption? What has led you to adoption, and are you prepared for it? Then we want to know about your lifestyle. What do you like to do? What is your marriage like/What do you enjoy about being single? If you practice a spirituality, what type and how often? And lastly, we like to hear about your parenting expectations. What do you hope for from your child?

## WHAT TO EXPECT

5. The second home study meeting involves meeting with each person (if a couple) separately. This part of the home study is about your history. What type of childhood did you have? How were your teenage years? Did you have any previous marriages? How do you feel about your marriage and the decision to adopt?

6. The third home study meeting will take place in your home, and any persons living in the home

must be present. The state has varying regulations that must be met by a foster home (which is what you will initially be), and our social worker will be checking for these in your home. If you do not meet some of the regulations, you will be notified and requested to change them within a specified amount of time. At this visit your social worker will let you know when your study will be finished and a copy will be sent to you.

7. If you are pursuing an international adoption, or a domestic transracial adoption, we may ask to see you a fourth time. This is more for educational purposes and to ensure you have some background in transracial/transcultural adoptions.

8. At this point, you are finished with the home study process.

If you are in an agency domestic adoption, we will ask you to make a profile of your life and aspirations to adopt. Your profile will then be added to our “pool” of waiting couples, and shown to anyone considering placing their child.

If you are pursuing international adoption, we forward your home study and hand you over to your international agency. Then we wait to hear from you when you return from your travels with your new child.

9. Once you have had a successful placement, we start post-placement visitation. This visitation is to ensure the child is doing well, and the family is adjusting appropriately. For a domestic adoption, after six months you can apply for your Finalization, which is the court date to complete your adoption. For an international adoption, post-placement may continue for a while longer (depending on the country’s requirements), and you may apply for Re-adoption, and receive a new birth certificate.

10. That’s it! It’s a long process, but at the end you will have a beautiful family to celebrate with. Adoption Services is here for any post-adoption resources or services you may need. We are only a call away.

# DOMESTIC ADOPTION FEE SCHEDULE

Adoption Services, Inc.

[www.adoptionservicesinc.com](http://www.adoptionservicesinc.com)

♦ 2439 S Oneida St, Appleton, WI 54915 (920) 735-6750 ♦  
♦ 5215 N Ironwood Rd, Suite 201, Glendale, WI 53217 (414) 332-1800 ♦

## DOMESTIC FEE SCHEDULE

<b>Initial Interview</b>	Free
<b>Application Fee</b>	\$ 300.00
<b>Adoptive Homestudy-</b> \$900 due with the return of the application and \$1,850 due at least five (5) days prior to the first meeting with a Social Worker. ( <i>\$700 is non-refundable</i> )	\$ 2,750.00
<b>Fingerprints</b>	\$50.00/person
<b>Update of a Current Adoptive Homestudy-</b> Completed by Adoption Services, Inc.	\$ 800.00
<b>2<sup>nd</sup> Homestudy-</b> For couples returning within 2 years of finalization ( <i>\$700 is non-refundable</i> )	\$ 2,500.00

<b>Agency Adoption</b>	
<b>Birthparent Counseling and Pre-Placement Services-</b> Matching Fee	\$ 8,500.00
<b>Agency Placement-</b> does not include legal fees or allowable birthparent expenses.	\$ 10,500.00
<b>Agency Post-Placement-</b> supervision for finalization of domestic agency adoption. ( <i>Wisconsin requires one (1) visit per month for a min. of six (6) months before finalization can occur.</i> )	\$ 250.00/visit/ child
<b>Agency Finalization Report-</b> Report to the court recommending the finalization of the adoption	\$ 300.00
<b>Online Profile-</b> Optional: In addition to your profile books, we provide clients with social media and online profile options.	\$200.00

<b>Independent Adoption-</b> In-State and Out-of-State ( <i>\$700 is Non-Refundable</i> )	\$4,500.00
Includes counseling before and after the child's birth, referral to community services, preparation of court report and appearance(s), consultation(s), interviews, paperwork, and coordinating information with prospective adoptive family, attorney(s), and hospital(s). The \$4,500.00 is due with the return of contracts.	
<b>Independent Post-Placement- In-State</b> supervision for finalization. ( <i>Wisconsin requires one (1) visit per month until finalization.</i> )	\$250.00/visit
<b>Independent Post-Placement- Out of State</b> supervision for finalization. ( <i>Wisconsin requires one (1) visit per month until finalization.</i> )	\$350.00/visit
<b>Independent Finalization Report</b>	\$350.00

<b>Relative Adoption or Embryo Adoption Home Study</b> ( <i>\$700 is non-refundable</i> )	\$ 2,700.00
<b>Adoption Services</b>	\$ 1,500.00
To <u>include</u> : birthparent services, court report, court appearance(s), consultation(s), and agency coordination. ( <i>Does not include legal or medical fees.</i> )	
<b>Relative Birthparent Services-</b> a \$1,000.00 deposit will be due prior to working with the birthparent. Fees for any additional hours will be due five (5) days prior to termination/finalization hearing. If applicable, any unused funds will be returned after the adoption is finalized	\$ 160.00/hour

# DOMESTIC ADOPTION FEE SCHEDULE

<b>Step-Parent Homestudy and Adoption-</b> one child. Does not include legal fees or out of state clearances. The couple must have been married at least one (1) year.	\$ 800.00
<b>Each additional child</b>	\$ 300.00
<b>Mileage:</b> A Mileage fee will be charged based on current IRS Standard Mileage Rate guidelines for travel from the agency office.	\$ SMR
<b>Travel Time:</b> a fee of \$1.50 per mile will be charged for travel time that exceeds 50 miles from the agency office.	\$ 1.50/mile
<b>COORDINATION FEES- if required</b>	
<b>Agency Court Appearance-</b> <i>Required in Milwaukee County</i>	\$ 200.00
<b>Guardianship</b>	\$ 500.00
<b>ICPC-</b> <i>Includes FedEx Fees</i>	\$ 400.00
<b>Adoption Assistance Application</b>	\$ 450.00
<b>Interagency Coordination</b>	\$ 300.00
<b>Case Management and Social Worker Services</b>	\$ 160.00/hour
<b>Processing Fee-</b> A 3% fee will be added to any payment made via Credit Card	3% Fee
<b>Delinquent Payment Fee-</b> will be applied to any fees not paid within 30 days of billing.	\$50.00/month

**FEES SUBJECT TO CHANGE WITHOUT NOTICE**

# DOMESTIC AGENCY ADOPTION IS...



You work with one agency



We are responsible for conducting your home study and any license updates, in-office and online profiles, matching you with potential birth parent(s), placement, termination of parental rights, post-placement, and finalization.

## PROGRAM REQUIREMENTS

As an agency we have certain requirements for perspective adoptive families looking to work with us on an adoption. Although they are not always mandated by the state, they are based on years of experience and interwoven into our agency mission, that every child deserves a permanent family.

Our clients and their families are important to us and that is why we take the time to carefully consider each perspective adoptive family. We do our best to individualize each experience and decision we make; above all, we always reserve the right to make exceptions to any or all of our requirements.

- > Couples must be married a minimum of one year.
- > Couples/individuals must be of an age range acceptable to birthparents.
- > Couples/individuals must be in reasonable good health. Individuals with past remissions from cancer or if they have received alcohol and/or drug therapy will be assessed on a case by case basis.
- > Couples/individuals will have an income adequate to provide for the financial needs of a child.
- > Couples/individuals understand and will notify the agency immediately if they become pregnant.
- > Couples/individuals understand a second adoption cannot be attempted until the adoption of the first child is finalized and the child is at least one year of age.
- > Single individuals and married partners may apply with the agency.
- > Criteria limits may be adjusted in the case of children with special needs.
- > Couples/individuals will agree not to use spanking, or any form of corporal punishment, as a form of discipline.

# FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

## **Do you work with a lot of birthmothers?**

On average, we work with 10-15 birthmothers, at each of our locations, per year. Birthmothers vary in age and the circumstances that lead them to choose adoption for their child.

## **How does a birthmother know what we are like?**

You create a profile that relays what type of parent and family you would be to your child. This profile contains information about yourself, your family, your desire to adopt, and your commitment to being a parent. It also contains photos of you and your family. Generally these profiles are 6-10 pages long, in a scrapbook format.

## **How long does it take to get chosen?**

Adoption Services will work with a “pool” of no more than 25 waiting couples (per location) at one time. Taking this and the number of birthmothers we typically have each year into consideration, we would estimate it could take anywhere from one to two years to be matched with a perspective birthmother. This is a very general estimation; adoption is a personal matter and involves someone finding the perfect “match.” As with all “match-making,” there are always other factors that determine the outcome. Domestic adoptions are unpredictable since placements are determined by a birthparents’ choice.

## **What do birthmothers generally look for in an adoptive family?**

Women typically choose adoption because they are unable to offer their child something that they wish them to have.

Factors they often consider in an adoptive family are:

- Marital relationship
- Income stability
- Family relationships (immediate and extended)
- Home, lifestyle, and location
- Opportunities available to their child

Again, this varies for each woman, and often has a lot to do with her own life experiences.

# FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

## **What if we are working with a birthmother and she changes her mind after the baby is born?**

In the State of Wisconsin, a mother has to legally terminate her parental rights in front of a judge. After a baby is born the court is petitioned and will have a court date within 30 days. A mother (even if she is thinking about adoption, and the baby is in foster care) continues to hold all legal rights to her child until that day in court. If, during this time, she changes her mind about adoption, she can decide to parent. There is a great deal of emotion that goes on when a mother finally sees the baby that she carried for nine months. It is hard to determine whether or not something like this is going to happen. However, there are some signs that a mother may be changing her mind about an adoption plan. Always talk to the Social Worker assisting the mother about any concerns you may have. You can be assured that at Adoption Services we will inform you if we are experiencing any ambivalence from your perspective birthmother. Even with that said, it is important to remember that the mother does have the right to change her mind, and it could happen to anyone. This is a risk for all domestic adoptions.

## **Do we need an attorney?**

In Wisconsin, an agency approved, attorney must be retained by the adopting family to facilitate and petition the court to complete the Termination of Parental Rights.

## APPROXIMATE COST

A Domestic Agency Adoption can cost between \$20,000 and \$30,000

National Average is between \$20,000 and \$40,000

( Planning for Adoption: Knowing the Costs and Resources. Child Welfare Information Gateway. <https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/s-cost/>. )

[ADOPTING > DOMESTIC](#)

## The Truth About Domestic Infant Adoption

An adoptive mother dispels common myths about adopting a newborn in the U.S.

by Eliza Newlin Carney

TAGS: [Adoption In the Media](#), [Adoption Trends](#), [Birth Family](#), [Opening an Adoption](#), [Reluctant Relatives](#)



When Katie and Jeffrey Davis set out to adopt a baby domestically, everyone close to the couple assumed they were in for an excruciatingly long wait. As it turned out, the Davises, who live in Baltimore, Maryland, were matched with a birth mother less than a month after their adoption agency started presenting their paperwork. Their daughter, now five, was placed in their arms just seven months after they started the adoption process.

“People think that adoption takes five years, just forever and ever,” says Katie. “They were shocked that we adopted a baby in the U.S., and that the process went so smoothly.”

### Domestic Adoption Reinvented

The Davis family’s story is not particularly unusual. While international adoption has commanded the limelight for the last two decades, domestic adoption has remained an untold story. Despite persistently negative and sensational media coverage, domestic adoption today is more transparent than ever before, and increasingly defined by healthier choices for birth families and adoptive families alike.

The fact that more than 18,000 American families successfully adopt newborn babies in the United States every year belies the widespread misperception that domestic adoption is a difficult, time-consuming, expensive, and risky process

The truth is that most families successfully adopt within two years of beginning the process. The cost of a domestic adoption varies widely, from under \$15,000 to more than \$50,000. According to surveys conducted annually by *Adoptive Families*, the median total cost of a domestic adoption is \$30,000 to \$45,000, which tends to be considerably less than that of a typical international adoption.

*[Free Download: Infertility and Adoption Guide]*

The most damaging, and most deeply entrenched, conviction—that birth parents return after relinquishing parental rights to try to reclaim the baby—virtually never comes to pass. “People watch TV and read the newspapers, and they are scared to death,” says Mark T. McDermott, an adoption attorney in Washington, D.C.

### **Domestic Adoptions Outpace International**

Although fewer adoptions currently take place each year within the U.S. compared to 35 years ago, domestic adoption is far from dying out. In fact, more U.S. families adopt domestically than internationally each year.

To be sure, the number of infant placements in the U.S. has dropped in recent decades. In the mid-1970s, as many as 49,000 American infants were placed for adoption each year. In 2007, the most recent year for which accurate numbers exist, there were an estimated 18,078 domestic newborn, non-relative adoptions.

The drop in the number of newborn adoptions since the 1970s coincides with a decline in the percentage of single mothers placing children for adoption, down from nine percent in the 1970s to 1.4 percent in 2002 (the most recent year for which this statistic was reported), according to the [National Survey of Family Growth](#). As the stigma against single parenthood has diminished over the last 35 years, so has the number of children placed for adoption.

Despite the tenacity of myths and stereotypes, domestic adoption has quietly redefined itself over a generation. Adoptive parents, once resigned to a lengthy wait at their local adoption agency, now have more options and more information. Expectant parents, once shamed and almost completely shut out of adoption decisions, are now involved in the process. Independent adoptions have increased in number and, by some accounts, now represent the majority of domestic adoptions. The Internet and smartphones have made it easier for like-minded birth parents and adopting families to find one another over geographic distances.

*[Instant eBook: Adopting a Newborn in the U.S.]*

### **From Secrecy to Transparency**

While almost every aspect of adoption is different than it was in the past, it is within the family matching process that the most change has occurred. In private and agency adoptions, rather than merely being assigned a baby to adopt without any background information to share with the child as he or she grows, adoptive parents now usually meet or talk with the birth family. Prospective birth parents, by the same token, are empowered to choose which family will adopt their child. Birth families are more likely to have access to counseling and independent legal representation, and, together with the adoptive family, determine the nature of contact after the adoption.

Almost everyone involved in adoption today—adoptive parents, birth parents, and adoption professionals—embraces this new transparency as an antidote to the confidentiality of the past. Birth families are reassured that their child will be well cared for; adopted children have the answers to questions that arise over the years.

Today, families who've adopted domestically often say that any initial concern about the role of birth parents has been replaced by gratitude for the opportunity to know their child's family of origin. They note the positive aspects of adopting domestically: the opportunity to parent a newborn, and the medical and social history they have for their child.

### **Getting to Know One Another**

Another misperception about open adoptions is that they constitute virtual “co-parenting.” In most cases, before the child is born or the adoption is finalized, the families agree to a mutually acceptable level of contact—though there is no “typical” scenario, and many let their contact evolve. Some birth and adoptive families correspond directly; some exchange updates

through an intermediary. Some use special e-mail accounts; others are friends on Facebook. Some see each other frequently; others don't meet face-to-face. On the whole, however, there seems to be a movement toward greater openness by all parties.

*[Free Workbook: The Adoption Decision Matrix]*

Adoption professionals report that, after the initial reassurance of letters following a child's birth, some birth mothers move on with their lives. In these cases, contact often diminishes. Dawn Smith-Pliner, executive director of the adoption agency Friends in Adoption, reports that contact is sometimes renewed in later years, by either the adoptive family or the birth family.

### **Adoption is Forever**

The fear that domestic adoptions are legally risky remains widespread. While there are no data on how many adoptions land in the courts, experts estimate that less than one percent of domestic adoptions are legally contested after the relinquishment of parental rights.

Kirsten Wilkerson and her husband, Pete, adopted their daughter, Meghan, less than a year after they began the process. At the beginning, the Wilkersons had fully expected to adopt a child from China or South Korea. That plan was driven, in part, by "the belief out there that birth parents would come back to reclaim their child," explains Kirsten, a psychologist who lives in Illinois.

But chance—or, as Kirsten says, fate—intervened. Her doctor told her about a pregnant patient who was considering placing her child for adoption. The doctor wanted to know whether Kirsten and Pete were interested in adopting the baby.

As it turned out, that call never came—but the experience did get Kirsten thinking. Soon afterward, a fateful conversation led her to another pregnant woman interested in making an adoption plan. As soon as she met Meghan's birth mother, recalls Kirsten, her fears about a birth mother's change of heart melted away. Three months later, she and Pete were parents.

### **Breaking Down Birth Mom Stereotypes**

Even as domestic adoption evolves, negative stereotypes of birth mothers refuse to die out. Most damaging are those portrayals of birth mothers heartlessly "giving up" their children. In reality, most of them have made a painful, but loving choice—one for which there is very little societal support.

*[Everything You Need to Know About Domestic Adoption Travel]*

Despite the perception that most birth mothers are irresponsible teenagers, many are single mothers in their twenties or thirties who already have a child, and who face economic pressure to place a child. "They are mothers who want the best life possible for their unborn child," says Steven Kirsh, an adoption attorney in Indianapolis.

### **Understanding is Growing**

Adopting a newborn domestically is eminently doable, say professionals. Nonetheless, waiting parents should educate themselves about the process, and about all their options. It's not uncommon for waiting parents to pursue more than one route at a time, filing paperwork with an agency and also networking independently.

Wait times are shortest for parents who place the fewest restrictions on the description of their "dream" child.

Many families have already discovered what the rest of America has yet to figure out: that the real story of domestic adoption has thousands of happy endings.

## THE PROCESS

## The Adoption Process from the Expectant Mother's Perspective

What is it really like to decide on adoption, look through parent profiles to choose a family, and place your child in their arms—and how can the adoption process better serve these women?

by Barbara Herel



I often think back to my domestic adoption process as a hopeful adoptive mom. While I was diligently crossing off the many tangible to-dos—fingerprints, financials, physicals—my daughter's birth mother was facing her own, very different process, which started from: I'm pregnant. Now what?

Back then, it was hard to see past the pile of paperwork to understand the emotional twists and turns that an [expectant mother](#) considering adoption faces. In truth, seven years later, there are still things I am discovering about this time. This is a humble attempt to offer a peek inside the adoption process from the expectant mother's perspective. My hope is that it can better inform both sides, making for a more empathetic and enlightened process.

### Meet the birth mothers:

Amy, 35, placed twelve years ago

**Jeni, 44, placed seven years ago**

**Margaret, 22, placed three years ago**

**Rhianna, 21, placed less than two years ago**

Professional takeaways from **Dawn Smith-Pliner**, founder and director of [Friends in Adoption](#)

All the women cited here prefer the term “birth mother” and have [open adoptions](#), meaning they receive pictures, emails/texts, and have visits. Margaret’s adoption was open until recently, when it was closed by the adoptive parents. It’s worth mentioning that all of the birth mothers who shared their experiences with us offer what most people would consider a positive take on adoption—but there are many birth mothers who feel differently and even wish they hadn’t placed their child. After listening to these stories, what struck me most is that, even with so-called “good” adoption experiences, placing a child doesn’t come easily. It is not a natural thing for a mother to do.

**1) When did you think of adoption as an option? Why? How did you discuss it with the people in your life?**

**AMY:** I knew that placing was the best option within a few weeks of learning I was pregnant. I was single, temporarily living with my parents, working a low paying job, and the guy I was hooking up with didn’t want anything to do with me (or the pregnancy). When I told my parents I was pregnant, they told me I would have to find a place of my own if I chose to parent, but I didn’t want this child to grow up in a single-parent home

**JENI:** After I found out I was pregnant, my mom and ex-husband (who was not the biological father) told me I had to put up the baby for adoption. I was completely overwhelmed, but sat with the idea for a few months. I eventually came to the same decision for these reasons—had the biological dad been a part of my daughter’s life, she would have been exposed to guns, drugs, and other dangers, and I couldn’t put my baby through that.

At the time, my ex-husband and I had shared custody of our six-year-old daughter, Julia. She did ask me several times why we couldn’t keep the baby. I was very open with her, explaining things in a way she could understand. She agreed, albeit sadly. I told Julia that open adoption meant we’d be in touch with the family, and we’d get to see Sarah once in awhile.

**MARGARET:** My daughter’s father and I were both in college and we weren’t working. I knew he wasn’t the guy I wanted to spend the rest of my life with and I didn’t want my child growing up in a split home. I started looking into adoption during the second month of my pregnancy when the shock started to wear off.

**RHIANNA:** There were so many reasons I didn't think I could parent at the time. The "dad" wasn't in the picture and I'm a full-time college student, deep in debt. My son would have grown up in daycare, never seeing me just so I could afford the basic necessities. I knew adoption was the answer because these are families who desperately want a child, and are so prepared to take care of one.

When I finally told my family I was pregnant, my mom's reaction was heartbreaking. She was a teen when she had my brother, and I knew that wasn't what she wanted for me. And yet she said that, as soon as I saw my baby, I would love him too much and change my mind. I knew I wanted to do it *because* of how much I already loved him.

**DAWN'S TAKEAWAY:** When a woman gets that unexpected positive pregnancy test, she's likely to feel overwhelmed. I say, "Let's take a deep breath here. Tell me how I can be most helpful. Maybe there is a way to parent. Let's talk about the resources that are available to you. Do you need information on abortion? Are you aware that open adoption allows you to stay connected to your child?" The ultimate goal is for an expectant mom (or couple) to be fully informed of her options and resources so she can have peace of mind and make the best possible decision.

**2) Did you use an agency or an attorney? What was your first contact like? What did you know about open adoption at this point, or how was it first explained to you?**

**AMY:** I used an adoption agency because I wanted to make sure there was someone there for me after placement, but I was still nervous when it came to my first contact. I looked online and some agencies seemed too eager to get ahold of my child, and others were a bit too relaxed. The agency that I ended up going with challenged me to contact five other agencies and ask a few common questions—and I got different answers to all of them [see BOX, below]. I also felt my agency was truly looking to help all parties involved in an adoption.

**JENI:** I became acquainted with a woman at Catholic Charities, Jo, who later became my adoption counselor. It was she who first introduced me to Spokane Consultants, an open adoption agency. I went home that afternoon, looked at their website, and cried. I kept thinking, what's natural about a mother giving away her child? How is that a loving thing to do?

**MARGARET:** My first meeting was with an agency. They answered a lot of my questions and made me feel really relaxed. However, I ended up going through an adoption attorney because of the way the adoptive parents and I connected. That first phone call to the attorney was very different from my contact with the agency; the attorney asked a lot of personal questions about me and the biological father and didn't really address any of my questions.

**RHIANNA:** Being from Alaska, there weren't many adoption agencies available to me, especially non-Catholic adoption agencies. I am a religious person, but many of the families going through the Catholic agencies seemed so posed, and none of them were interested in an open adoption. In the early weeks of my pregnancy, I contacted a teacher friend of mine from high school. She almost immediately offered to do a private, open adoption with me. She also encouraged me to look around and keep my mind open to other potential families. The adoption attorney we used was a wonderful, patient lady, but I never actually met her.

**DAWN'S TAKEAWAY:** For both expectant mothers and hopeful adoptive parents, it's important to do your research. Adoption is a legal and emotional endeavor and you want a solid legal and emotional foundation. An expectant mother is incredibly vulnerable and might fall for the first friendly voice she comes across. She needs to look beyond the friendly voice and ask, *is this person providing me with unbiased information?* It's also important to hit the fast-forward button. *Does the agency or attorney offer post-adoption counseling? If so, for how long? What do you imagine your open adoption relationship looking like in five years? In 10?*

**3) Looking back at this emotional time, how did these interactions make you feel? Did you receive counseling? Did you feel you would be supported if you changed your mind?**

**AMY:** I did feel supported by all the adoption professionals I encountered during each appointment, phone conversation, and post-placement counseling session, and do not recall ever being made to feel guilty. They said they would support me in whatever choice I made, even if I decided not to sign at the last minute; that this was my right. I did feel as if I would be messing up the prospective adoptive parents' plans if I changed my mind, though.

I had been seeing a family counselor off and on for many years, and also had pre-placement counseling at the agency. Appointments covered how I was feeling at the time, how I thought I would feel after placement, searching for the adoptive parents, developing a birth plan for the hospital, my hopes for the adoption agreement, and understanding what the relinquishment papers said and how they are legally enforced.

**JENI:** Initially I was extremely upset at my ex-husband and my mom for telling me I couldn't keep the baby. Once I made the decision of my own free will, I understood where they were coming from. I couldn't have made it through those dark days without them, especially my ex. It brought us closer and we are now remarried. As for my counselor at Catholic Charities, she never once judged me. She gave me all my options and the resources associated with each. She was my safe place. The agency also provided free counseling for three years.

I knew the prospective adoptive parents, Sue and Ken, would be sad if I changed my mind, but I don't think they would have hated my guts. They had had a previous adoption fall

through after they had brought the baby home, but this didn't change their determination to be a family.

**MARGARET:** I felt supported by the first agency I contacted. I didn't really feel supported by the attorney I ultimately used. Our interactions weren't uncomfortable, just very blasé. The only counseling I received was from my therapist, whom I had seen for years. My attorney did give me a number for an adoption therapist, and I met with her once after placement, but it wasn't the right fit.

Whenever I thought about changing my mind, I would think, "How can I do that to the adoptive mom?" I wasn't worried about the professionals, but I didn't want to hurt her. The only time I truly wavered, though, was after I had signed the papers and left the hospital. I knew I was still allowed to change my mind even then, but it felt like it was too late. I'm glad I didn't take my daughter back, though, because I did what was best for her.

**RHIANNA:** I think almost everybody expected me to change my mind. There was a moment when I was in the tub and my son was kicking and dancing in my stomach when I was like, "Am I really doing this?!" But, I knew adoption was one hundred percent the best thing for him. The fact that my mom was a teen mom was one of the stronger reasons I had for placing. Not because she wasn't a good mom to my brother, but his childhood was just messy—growing up with babysitters or grandparents while my mom worked, and then kind of being the outcast of the family when my mom married my dad.

While I never really considered changing my mind, my son's adoptive mom constantly reminded me that it would be OK if I did. I knew she would have been supportive.

**DAWN'S TAKEAWAY:** Adoption is a life-long process for all involved and it requires support and continuing education. An expectant mom/couple making this decision without the support of professional counselors is, unfortunately, not surprising or uncommon, and can be tragic. Agencies and attorneys need to press for pre- and post-adoption counseling, even if the expectant mom/couple says, "I'm OK." Sometimes saying, "May I have a colleague speak to you?" instead of a "social worker" or "therapist" makes all the difference. No one can have too much support!

**4) What did you think of the prospective parent profiles? What were you looking for? How did you select your child's adoptive family?**

**AMY:** Oh, don't we all just *love* the "Dear Birth Mom" letters? I didn't care how many trips each couple went on or that the potential mother would bake cookies from scratch for the child's classroom holiday party. My list of musts included: living in the same state as me (or within a one-day drive), the same religion as me, the same morals on popular social topics, and similar hobbies and/or interests. I also looked to see how many kids they had. If no kids, did they want to adopt more in the future? And, finally, how open they were regarding

contact.

**JENI:** Originally, my cousin and her husband were going to adopt my baby, but they called it off the day before she was born. I then reached out to Nancy, at Spokane Consultants, and she came over to the house with some profiles. One of the couples I said no to were well-educated with high-paying jobs, prominent members of their community, and about a decade older than I was. I wanted to place my child with a family I could relate to, have a cup of coffee with.

My daughter, Julia, also looked through the profiles, and we both chose the same couple—Sue and Ken. There were so many similarities between our families. For instance, Sue wrote that her parents were “lovey dovey” around each other, and my parents are the same way. Ken is an architect, and so was my great grandfather. One page had pictures of Sue and Ken bringing their adopted son home from the hospital along with the words “Faith” and “Joy.” Joy is the name I would have given the baby had I decided to parent. It was so obvious to me that they were the ones. I was like, “I get it, God!”

**MARGARET:** I actually did not go through any profiles. I didn’t have much support and I think I was scared to do that type of work with no help from anyone. My doctor knew someone who wanted to adopt, so he connected us through lawyers. The adoptive mom was the only person I met with. When she and I first met, it just felt right. I really liked the idea that my baby would grow up with someone like me.

**RHIANNA:** I’m sure putting together a profile is not an easy thing to do, but all of the families seemed so posed. One even had the size of their yard in the “about me” section. It made me feel like they were shopping for animals! Heather, my son’s adoptive mom, was always open, easygoing, and didn’t try to advertise her lifestyle.

**DAWN’S TAKEAWAY:** To the expectant mom—close your eyes. If you’ve decided not to parent, what are you looking for in a family? What do you value? Don’t compromise on your most important values. To the hopeful adoptive parents—think of your profile as a handshake, not as marketing. This is about getting to know one another. Think about what makes you you. Remember that your profile is the first step to a life-long relationship.

**5) Was there a moment when you handed your child to his or her adoptive parents? Please share what that was like for you.**

**AMY:** The adoptive mom was in the room throughout labor and delivery, and was one of the first people to hold our daughter. It is such an odd flood of emotions, because you are happy yet sad and then confused all at the same time. I will admit that I chose not to hold my child a whole bunch because it was just too difficult for me.

**JENI:** When it was time for Ken and Sue to take the baby back to their hotel room, all of us

were just crying in the hospital doorway, including the nurse. I knew this would be the hardest thing I would ever do in my life, but I also felt I owed it to both my daughter and myself. Sitting in the wheelchair, I lifted up my baby and realized I had to say something profound, but all I could come up with was, “I don’t think I need to tell you to love her.”

**MARGARET:** I cried from the moment I hugged the adoptive mom goodbye until the next day. I didn’t want to let go. I remember clinging to her, crying, and her just being as supportive as she could be. She let me say goodbye one more time after the baby was already in the car, and closing that door was so hard.

**RHIANNA:** There wasn’t that moment. Heather actually cut the umbilical cord, and handed my son to me. Since it was a c-section, it felt a lot less intimate than a natural birth would have. I didn’t mind everyone being there, yet it did feel as if tensions were high. Everyone constantly made sure I was comfortable and OK. Heather and the baby spent that first night in the hospital room with me and I could hold him as much as I wanted. They went home the next day.

**DAWN’S TAKEAWAY:** The expectant mother/couple makes her adoption plan twice—once while pregnant, once after birth. This is the moment when her whole life changes. While pregnant she needs to think about who she wants to be there. Where do you want the hopeful adoptive parents to be? Do you want a doula? Do you want to hand your baby over in the hospital or somewhere else? She/they need to also know that she has the right to change her mind about anything, including the adoption.

Hopeful adoptive parents need to understand that they are not in charge. They need to be invited to the hospital, where they will be guests. During the risk period, they are babysitting until the parent/s decides whether or not to terminate her rights. Hopeful parents also need to think in terms of a support system. If the mom/couple decides to parent, you will be devastated and need support to get through this time.

## **6) Please describe coming home from the hospital without the baby.**

**AMY:** Coming home from the hospital without my daughter was and will probably always be one of the worst days of my life. It is not natural to walk into a hospital pregnant, go through 17.5 hours of labor, hold this baby and care for her for two full days, and then kiss her goodbye. When she goes home with a different family, even though it’s one you have chosen, you feel as if you have signed your life away.

**JENI:** It was awful. My mom and I went to the supermarket to get deli stuff for dinner, acting as if it were just another day running errands. I remember sitting on the couch that night, feeling utterly destroyed and just sobbing. Then there are the showers in the days afterward, when your milk comes in and you have no baby to give it to, and the fluids going down the drain include breast milk and tears....

**MARGARET:** It was the hardest thing I can remember going through. I was enveloped in depression and I allowed myself to feel it because I knew I needed to.

**RHIANNA:** Very weird. I did feel kind of empty for the first few days. I wasn't sad; I knew I did the right thing, but I did miss the little kicks and felt alone. Heather checked up on me often, as much as someone with a newborn can, and came over too.

**DAWN'S TAKEAWAY:** The expectant mother can't ever really prepare herself for the loss, the grief. She needs support, support, support. She needs caring professionals and family and friends to reach out to her a day, a month, years after the placement, letting her know she is not forgotten.

To the hopeful adoptive parents—when you bring baby home, yes, you will be busy and exhausted, but you are now connected to the child's birth family. There are many ways to honor them, from sending a simple text to let the birth mother know you're thinking of her, to calling, to planning a visit, to telling your baby her adoption story.

**7) Do you recall the days and months that followed, as you got back to your "old" life (or made life changes) after this major occurrence?**

**AMY:** I recall it being difficult for the first months following placement. How could it not be? No person ever thinks that she will get pregnant and then choose to sign her parental rights away. I dove deep into grief counseling at the adoption agency and self-help books to deal with the emotions. People outside of the adoption world will never fully understand how a person can't just "bounce back" to her old life, but every baby commercial, every love song makes you miss your child. Adoption grief is different than grief for someone who has died or following a miscarriage. It is knowing that there is a part of you walking around in the world and that you will not be there for those first words, first steps, first dance class.

**JENI:** Those first days and months seemed to drag by. If I didn't hear from Sue and Ken for a few days, or if they didn't answer my text right away, I'd freak out, thinking they hated me, I'd never get to see my child, and so on. But they were always true to their word.

I continued with counseling for the first couple of years, but what really helped was when Julia and I got involved with Girl Scouts. We met new people, and I eventually formed my own troop. The parents and the girls know about the adoption and act like it's no big deal, sometimes asking questions about Sarah, just as if I were parenting her.

**MARGARET:** The day after I got home from the hospital I woke up and felt relief, like a weight was off my shoulders. I went back to school a little more than a month after my daughter was born, and got a job a week later. I also joined a support group for birth mothers.

I'm not going to lie and say I made the best of this situation though. That fall I started dating a guy who introduced me to weed, which I used to self-medicate my depression, and I also became pregnant with my son. I had told myself I would do better with my life after having my daughter, that I would make her proud, but instead I did the opposite. Most of the women in my support group said they went through the same thing.

**RHIANNA:** People were weird. Everyone except Heather expected me to be this major mess, and was worried about my being home alone. Once I got back to work, and people stopped tiptoeing around me, everything was just normal again.

**DAWN'S TAKEAWAY:** The old life is never the same life. I don't know one single birth parent who doesn't hold his or her child in her heart every single day. The love for their child is fierce. Maybe this love isn't vocalized, but it is just as real as if they had chosen to parent.

To the adoptive parents, how are you integrating your child's extended birth family into your life? How are you speaking about your child's birth mom and family? Are you asking your child if she or he would like to send a picture or a report card or anything else to his/her biological family? Are you maintaining relationships with birth siblings?

**8) Is there anything you wish you'd done differently? Do you regret placing your child for adoption?**

**AMY:** I think I would have given myself more alone time in the hospital with my daughter. I also would have been more diligent about contact with the adoptive family. I know that is something that could be changed even now.

But I try not to allow myself to get into the "What ifs" or the "I wonder how things would be if I had chosen to parent" type of thoughts. I know that my life would look very different, and that there are advantages and disadvantages to either side of the situation. I am trying to look forward rather than back, and to make the best of what I have been given.

**JENI:** I wish I would have met Sue and Ken at the outset and bypassed my cousin, but that would have had its own challenges. When I was first mulling over the idea of adoption, the idea that I was placing my child with a family member in my hometown made it easier for me. I wasn't ready to think about placing her with strangers.

I don't regret it because I can't give Sarah the life she deserves. It wasn't her fault she was conceived, so why should she pay the price? I'm glad she didn't end up in Spokane, which can seem like a small town when you run into people you haven't seen in years. It would have been a sad life for her, for all of us. Now, just a day's drive away, she is freed from the judgment she would have faced and able to grow up to be the amazing person she's supposed to be.

**MARGARET:** Even though my adoption is now closed, by the adoptive parents, I still believe adoption was what was best. But I do wish I had looked into more families and had chosen differently. I think I was scared, so I just went along with the quickest, easiest route and took the first family I met.

**RHIANNA:** No, I don't regret it. Even now, a year and a half later, my life still isn't sorted out. I'm so young and have so much ahead of me. I'm glad I'm not forcing a child to live through all of my life mistakes. When I was growing up, I felt like adults just assumed a "birth mom" was a drugged out person who wanted to party and was too messed up to take care of a kid, and I want to reclaim the term. I want my son, Asher, to grow up and be like, "OK, cool, she did it so she could finish her college degree and make something of herself." I want him to be proud of me. Even if I could take back the unplanned pregnancy and the whole experience, I wouldn't. It made me a better person and gave me a whole other family.

# Understanding Open Adoption – The Benefits and Challenges

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**Among experts who study it and families who practice it, open adoption varies widely. Here, a look at open adoption today.**

By Eliza Newlin Carney

When California residents Kim and Carl Felder adopted their son, Robbie, they [got to know his birth mother](#), Tony, very well. The relationship grew so close, in fact, that Tony lived with the Felders for a while before Robbie was born.

But when Robbie was about three years old, Kim recalls, “Tony literally disappeared. And it just about crushed me.” Kim wondered where Tony was and whether she was alright. Robbie, too, wondered aloud why his birth mother didn’t call or write. Tony did resurface a few years later, and Robbie spoke to her on the phone. He asked her to write, but no letter ever came.

“The sad part was that Tony didn’t follow through,” Kim says. “Every day we went to the mailbox.” Eventually, she had to put her arms around her then seven-year-old son and explain that some things were hard for Tony to do, that this was why she looked to Kim and Carl to be his “everyday” parents. “He cried and cried, and it was very sad,” she said. “But that is the reality of our life.”

The empty mailbox is just one example of the challenges that families in open adoptions may face. In recent years, we have embraced the concept of open adoption with gusto—yet the journey, for some, has proved to be unexpectedly bumpy. Lack of support, a sudden change in the life of either the adoptive or biological family, logistical pressures—all can complicate matters. Add to that the emotionally charged issues at stake—parenthood, power, identity—and open adoption can make for some combustible family dynamics.

To be sure, open adoption gets rave reviews from the many social workers and families who champion it. Since the mid-1970s, open adoptions have been widely accepted as more compassionate and enlightened than the secretive adoptions of a previous generation. Indeed, [the confidentiality that once defined adoption is no longer the norm](#). While international adoptions remain mostly closed, as do many foster adoptions, domestic adoptions increasingly involve [contact between adoptive parents and birth parents](#).

The good news is that recent research debunks many of the myths that once stigmatized openness. Children in open adoptions have no confusion as to who their parents are, and birth mothers in open adoptions have less trouble moving on. If anything, openness appears to help kids understand adoption; relieve the fears of adoptive parents; and help birth mothers resolve their grief, according to researchers Harold D. Grotevant and Ruth G. McRoy. “Many of the fears about open adoption do not seem to be a problem,” said Grotevant, a professor at the University of Minnesota and co-author with McRoy of *Openness in Adoption: Exploring Family Connections*.

Grotevant, however, sounded a note of caution to those who portray it as a panacea. The children of open

adoption do not have higher self-esteem than those in closed adoptions, he observed. For children in each group, self-esteem is about the same, his research found. He stressed that more research is needed to assess the impact of open adoption on adolescents. (The research he did with McRoy studies children up to age 12.)

## Degrees of Openness

For many families, open adoption remains controversial and misunderstood. Even among experts, definitions of "open adoption" vary wildly. In its simplest sense, an open adoption is one in which the adopting parents and the birth mother (and possibly the [birth father](#)) have some form of contact, directly or through an agency or lawyer. At one extreme are the families who exchange letters and pictures but have never met. At the other are the children whose adoptive and birth families socialize at least once a month or more.

Most open adoptions lie somewhere in the middle, according to Grotevant and McRoy, exchanging letters, pictures, phone calls, texts, connecting on Facebook, and having face-to-face meetings once or twice a year. Whatever their situation, many families report that relatives and friends condemn openness, and voice fears that the arrangement will make the birth parent want the child back.

"The challenge we have is getting the media and people outside our immediate family to understand that open adoption is the best choice we've ever made," said Jill Dillon, a resident of southern Oregon, whose daughter, Carly, is eight years old. "We feel that it's a healthy, safe way for our child to grow up, knowing her birth family and her 'real' family, as we think of ourselves."

Carly's father, Doyle, knows about closed adoption firsthand: he was adopted and didn't find his birth parents until he was 33. "He certainly wanted Carly to know more about her background than he did," said Jill. Carly talks on the phone with her birth mother, exchanges pictures and letters, and sees her about three or four times a year. She has also had several visits with her birthfather. Last summer, Carly was a flower girl in her birth mother's wedding.

## Challenges for Children with Open Adoption

For children in open adoptions, the toughest challenge may come when a birth parent who's been visiting or calling suddenly vanishes or drifts away. The trigger can be a move to a new job, a marriage, or a personal problem, such as drugs or alcohol. In some cases, a birth mother may not feel worthy of contact, or she may get the message from the adoptive parents that she's not welcome.

Laura Miller, of Long Beach, California, was committed to an open adoption for her now 13-year-old son, in part because she had seen her adopted brother suffer from lack of knowledge. But Miller has had to work hard to keep her son's birth mother in their lives.

"Although I'm very open, [his birth mother] drops into and out of our lives as she needs to," Miller said. After one long absence, when her son was nine years old, she paid for his birth mother to fly from Colorado to California and stay with them for ten days. Miller doesn't give up, she said, "because I think we need to honor the pieces that we didn't provide in the makeup of the child."

Experts say that some social workers initially pushed open adoption as a benefit to birth mothers. This turned out to be a mistake. "A lot of birth parents went into it thinking it was a privilege to them," said

Brenda Romanchik, executive director of [Insight: Open Adoption Resources and Support](#), an adoption education and support organization in Royal Oak, Michigan. "So when things got tough, they thought, this isn't working for me, so I'm going to leave. They didn't take the child into account."

Occasionally birth parents experiencing shame or sadness just have to retreat for a while. In rare cases, when safety is an issue, adoptive families may have to cut off contact. A child whose biological parent disappears experiences a double whammy. He wonders why he was placed to begin with, then feels rejected again because a birth mother no longer visits.

"Children occasionally have some pain when the birth parents opt out," acknowledged Sharon Kaplan Roszia, who, with Lois Ruskai Melina, authored *The Open Adoption Experience*. "I have to remind parents when that happens, that, as long as their door is open, they are practicing open adoption." Adoptive families who have lost touch with a birth parent should establish contact with other members of the child's biological family if they can, such as birth-grandparents, Roszia suggested.

In the early days of open adoption, Roszia noted, the conventional wisdom was that adoptive parents would be the ones to drift away. That has not turned out to be the case. "I think the people who have disappeared most often have been the families of origin," she said.

Roszia and other professionals advise families to be flexible, to recognize that all family relationships change over time. What worked for a child at infancy may not work when that child starts school or enters the middle years. "When kids begin to understand reproduction, they may become sad to realize that their adoptive mother is not the one who gave birth to them," said Romanchik. It's important for adoptive parents to validate those feelings, she noted, without anxiety that they are somehow betraying the birth mother.

Parents may also wonder how to react when kids start voicing their preferences regarding birth parent contact. Letting a young child call the shots in an open adoption is probably a bad idea. (After all, small children don't get to decide when to visit grandparents or other relatives.) But a child of 12 may be ready to make some decisions about whether or when to meet with birthparents. "The older a child gets, the larger the role they should have," Grotevant advised.

Things can also get tricky if a child's adoptive and biological parents have different values or expectations. Karen Chavoie had to bite her tongue recently when her 13-year-old daughter, Kendall, came back from a shopping trip with her birthmother, Stefani. "Some of the things they came back with, I really didn't agree with," said Chavoie, who lives in Portland, Oregon. "I felt they were a bit too grown-up for Kendall."

A generation gap played a role. Chavoie is 47, her husband, Rob Holliday, is 45, while Stefani is 28. (She gave birth to Kendall at age 15.) As do many adoptive parents, Chavoie and Holliday took on something of a parental role with their daughter's birth mother. This was not always easy, Chavoie acknowledged. "If you have a certain amount of closeness with your child's birth parents, you're going to fall into their lives," Chavoie said. "And it becomes a matter of stepping back and letting them make their choices."

If adoptive parents end up "parenting" a birth mother, too, she may eventually push them away, and this could hurt the child. Conversely, it may not be appropriate for adoptive parents to confide to a birth mother about how their child is grappling with adoption.

## Putting the Children First with Open Adoption

Most importantly, experts say, biological and adoptive parents must remember that open adoption is about meeting the needs of children, not adults. Openness does not simply wipe away the feelings of grief, fear,

or insecurity that can swirl around an adoptive placement.

"It removes the mystery, but it doesn't remove the grief," said Claude Riedel, a psychologist and family therapist who co-directs the Adoptive Family Counseling Center in Minnesota. "The reality is that, at certain stages, it's normal to have questions: why did you choose not to parent me, not to keep me? And there may be complexities: have you kept your other children, but not me?"

Now that the first open-adoption generation is under way, social workers are becoming more aware of the role of siblings in these arrangements. An adoptive child's relationships with biological siblings need to be taken into account. And two children adopted into the same family may have different degrees of openness with their birth mothers. Openness may also affect decisions about family size.

Sue and Dean Heinzman, who live in Maryland, are huge fans of their son's birth mother, Carly. The Heinzmans and their son, Ben, now three, socialize regularly with Carly and her extended family. Yet that very closeness has made a second domestic adoption seem daunting to them. "I couldn't be involved with another family," Sue says. "I just can't add umpteen more people in my life." At the same time, the Heinzmans are thrilled to have hit it off so well with their son's birthmother. "I love this open adoption," she said. "I love Carly."

Sue Heinzman's enthusiasm for openness was echoed by virtually every family interviewed for this story. Even Kim Felder, whose empty mailbox made her son so sad, would not have it any other way. Robbie is one of four children adopted by the Felders, all of them involved some form of openness. And Kim knows the pain of closed adoption firsthand: she placed her son, Jim, for adoption 24 years ago, reuniting with him when he was 18.

"My kids are of all different races and religious backgrounds, and it has been awesome to have that resource in our family," said Kim. "It gives them a sense of their history, their ethnicity, and of who they are."

*Eliza Newlin Carney and her husband live in Maryland with their daughter, adopted domestically.*

## **Open Adoption: An International View by Susan Cox, Holt International**

Until recently, openness in international adoption was a distant prospect. Some adoptive parents even chose intercountry adoption to avoid the prospect of encounters with their child's birth parents. Today, however, parents are increasingly seeking out their children's birth parents across international boundaries.

Openness in international adoption is likely to evolve gradually as it did in this country. How individual countries respond is likely to reflect the history of adoption and the country's culture. Korea, with its long history in international adoption and its current focus on reunions between relatives across North Korea's borders, seems to be embracing adoptee and birth parent reunions. China and Russia, on the other hand, prohibit contact between adoptive and birth parents, but this may change someday.

Reunion across international borders involves not only the sensitive issues we are familiar with in this country but also the added complexity of language, poverty, and differing educational and occupational opportunities. Nonetheless, the quest for self has no geographic boundaries but is a universal human response.



THANK  
YOU....



**For considering Adoption Services Inc. as a potential partner in your Adoption Journey!**

The last questions I want to answer for you is...

## WHAT DO WE DO NEXT?

Remember that 1st tip I gave you on the cover?....

For couples and individuals that are interested in pursuing a Domestic Agency Adoption we offer a FREE, One-on-One informational meeting with one of our experienced staff.

They will be able to answer all of those lingering questions that you have written down and the ones that are bound to pop into your... as you process the information we have provided.



Our staff members have the experience and knowledge to really dive into the details of the adoption process, working with birthparents, budgeting, fee structure, and anything else that you need and want to know.

### **When you are ready to schedule a meeting...**

Contact your closest Adoption Services Inc. office (see page 2 for contact information) and we can arrange a date and time. Meetings are typically 60-90 minutes and they occur in our office Monday-Friday between the hours of 9:00 am and 3:00 pm. Our Staff's office hours are not always consistent so when you call please have a few dates and times that work for you so we can match your availability to our staff member's.

Thank You, and best wishes on your Adoption Journey!