

Putting Fears To Rest

By Patricia Dischler

Counselors have much on their plate when facilitating an adoption process, but one of the most daunting can be getting adoptive parents to face their fears so they can move forward. For a couple looking to adopt, their priority is to build their family by having a child. So, when the counselor tells them that this child comes with attachments – the birthmother – it becomes something different than what the adoptive family first imagined. Whenever we are faced with something new or different and life we became wary, the fears begin to seep in and we start to ask those dreaded “what if...?” questions.

This is a natural, and appropriate, reaction for adoptive parents. Counselors will be best prepared when they plan for the conversation and facilitate it, rather than waiting for the adoptive parents fears to grow and become unmanageable.

To help adoptive parents face this fear head on, and move past it to a place of respect and understanding, counselors can provide the following information and conversations:

-Every child, every person, has a history. We are who we are partly because of those who came before us. It is engrained in us, it is the reason so many adults do genealogy searches. We want to know why are eyes are green, why we can play the piano so easily, why are hair is black, why our feet are small. We wonder why we hate peas or love sailing. It is natural instinct to be aware of our past and see it's progression through us. When children come to us through adoption it is vital to remember that they had a “beginning,” and that it will affect who they are. Regardless of our potential contact with a birth family, the child will always have a connection and the more respect we show for that – the more we respect the child.

-A child's self-esteem is built (or torn down) by those who raise him or her. When a child is shown respect for everything that makes them who they are, they will gain respect for themselves. Children who pick up from the adults around them that there is a “hidden” part of their lives will feel it must be something to be ashamed of, which gives them a self-image tainted with shame. The parents of adoptees who only hold positive, and honest, discussion regarding adoption will pass on to their child a positive self image.

-Birthmother's who choose adoption are not looking to co-parent their child. They have made the choice to place their child in a family, the formation of this family is important to the birthmother's view of having made the right choice for their child. She is fearful of anything that would tear it apart – even of it being herself. More often than not you hear stories of adoptive families that embraced the idea of communication with a birthmother, but it is the birthmother who pulls back! The birthmother CHOSE for her child to have this family, it goes completely against this to become invasive and threaten the existence of the family. So birthmother's pull away, either to avoid causing problems, or because they see the success of the family unit and her fears have been put to rest, so there is no need for further contact. She sees she made the right choice, her child is loved and part of a family.

-All the actions of birthmother, and birth families, come from love. This is a family that loves this child, and always will. The only time conflict comes out of love is when adults feel the need to compete for it.

From a child's perspective this is ridiculous! When all the adults focus on the child, and their love for the child, answers come more easily. No one in this world can be loved by TOO MANY people. When adoptive parents embrace the idea that their child is blessed by having so many who care about him – the child will truly feel blessed.

-Children who are placed for adoption through the foster care system are loved no less by their birth families. In cases where a court makes the decision for the birth mother, often it is because she loves the child, but doesn't have the strength due to drugs, abuse, or mental illness, to make good choices for the child – including choosing adoption. Adoptive parents have the ability to help their child understand that they were indeed loved. There is no such thing as an “unwanted” child.

-When there is no contact with birthmothers, such as in closed adoptions, respect for a child's beginnings becomes no less important. Many adoptive parents choose overseas adoption in order to avoid having contact with birthmothers. This is a sad fact. This is one reason to have these conversations about facing this fear very early on in the adoption process. As stated earlier, the adoptive parent's feelings about adoption will affect the child's self-image. Adoptive parents in closed adoptions need to work especially hard to provide the child with a sense of respect for their beginnings. With the absence of a birth mother to provide this information, it becomes the adoptive parents responsibility to embrace a child's culture and teach the child respect and pride for their past. Parents who ignore this will find themselves in the same position as adoptive parents from the 1960's in closed adoptions – facing their adult child who is asking to search for their birth family. The potential for anger or resentment from the child towards the adoptive parent who does not show respect for their past is daunting.

The bottom line is – it is about the children. Considering everyone who considers adoption is doing so for the sake of a child, it would seem that keeping focus on the needs of the child would be a simple task. However, often the adults bring their own wants and needs to the table and it begins to crowd out the wants and needs of the child. Counselors who can help sweep away the unnecessary clutter created by fears will become the catalyst for the success of any adoption, and the hero for the children they serve.

My son Joe is 22 now. He is a strong, independent, proud young man with a bright future. He holds no anxiety over being adopted. I attribute this to his parents, Jerry and Kathy. To me, he is the symbol of success in adoption. To talk to him about it brings so much clarity to the issue. When I asked him if it was okay to write a book about our story he answered, “You need to write this book. I am so tired of hearing people respond ‘I'm sorry’ when I tell them I'm adopted. I tell them there is nothing to be sorry for! I have wonderful parents that love me and gave me a great life. I have a birthmother that I know loves me and put me in this great family, but was always nearby watching out for me. What could there possibly be to feel sorry about?”

When Joe was only 12 he asked his parents if he could get to meet me face to face (we had only exchanged letters/photos to this point). His father had given him the letter I wrote in the hospital, filled with “I love you.” Joe said, “I figure anyone who loves me that much ought to be someone I get to know.” Now how can anyone argue with that?

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