

Q&A with Dale and Raquel

Openness

Relationships with your child's birthparents, like all relationships, may change over time. There may have been frequent initial contact and the response may have tapered off. Conversely, there may have initially been no contact or contact only through an intermediary and now your child is expressing a desire for more direct contact.

When considering increasing the openness in an adoption, you may be concerned about your child risking rejection. At first, it may appear it would be best to wait until your child reaches adolescence before initiating or increasing contact to minimize the impact of that risk. However, as we discussed in last month's article on sharing personal history, adolescence is a period of considerable upheaval and in fact, your child's elementary years (ages 6 – 11) may be the best time to consider more openness.

The elementary years or latency period is a time when many children of adoption begin to really understand what adoption means to them. They begin to comprehend that their adoption gave them a family but also involved the loss of another one. This loss may include loss of relationships with birth family members, gaps in knowledge of personal history, changes in cultural experiences, etc.

As children try to understand why they were placed for adoption, they may begin to make incorrect conclusions. Children in early latency believe they are the reason for everything that happens to them; therefore, they may believe it is their fault they were placed for adoption. You can alleviate some of these concerns by sharing information about the reasons for your child's placement. Contact with birth parents may be able to provide more insight and information to reassure your child.

The possibility of rejection certainly remains. Birth parents may not be ready for contact at the same time you are. They may initially be responsive to increased contact and then become inconsistent. During latency, your child is more likely to accept your efforts to explain possible reasons for these reactions. You can explain that the birth parent may still have sad feelings about the adoption and that people have different ways of acting when they are sad. You can explain that he or she may be going through a difficult time in his or her life. Because children at this age tend to respect what their parents say, they will be reassured by your response. They are more likely to appreciate the fact that at least you tried to make contact and that you tried to meet a need they had. They will also

have time to process their own sadness and grief in a relatively calm period in their lives.

In adolescence, however, everything is much more personal and your child is more likely to interpret a lack of response or refusal of contact by the birth parent as a personal rejection. Your attempts to explain may be interpreted as "siding" with the birth parent. And your teenager will need to deal with additional grief and sadness in an already very turbulent time.

Let's imagine the situation is your child has specifically expressed an interest in meeting his or her birth mother. You have an address and had initially corresponded with your child's birth mother but stopped receiving responses some time ago. You could try sending a letter explaining that your child would like to have contact with her. Include, as well, a letter directly from your child.

If you don't hear back, but the letter is not returned as unknown, you could try writing again. The tone of the second letter should be very respectful and express understanding that she may not be ready for contact now. You could also ask that she let you know she received the letters. If you still don't hear back, this is when you would have one of the conversations outlined above about the sadness she might still feel.

If the letter is returned as unknown, you could try doing your own Internet search of her name and continue if you find a likely address. If not, we would not recommend a lawyer search at this time. Something of that magnitude is more appropriate post adolescence. Ultimately, if the reach out does not end in a connection, again the message to your child is that you heard his or her need and did your best to meet it. If the connection is successful, your child may find some needed answers to some of the questions he or she is facing.

As with sharing difficult personal history, there are some situations in which establishing or reestablishing contact is not appropriate until adulthood. History that includes rape, incest, violent criminal history or current incarceration would be some examples. If your child's history involves those or similar situations, your response to requests for meeting his or her birth parents could involve language such as "Your birth mother or birth father is facing very grown up problems right now and now is not the right time for us to meet him or her. I promise that I will help you with this when you are an adult and ready to hear about their grown up problems."