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Managing Shifting Expectations in Open Adoption Over Time

BY AMY HUTTON SINK

I found out I was pregnant shortly after I began my senior year of high school. At the time, I was in serious relationship with my boyfriend Robbie. Although we were very surprised and completely unprepared to see those two pink lines, we decided, almost immediately, that we would raise our child together.

Soon, however, reality began to set in. Doubts began to arise. Neither Robbie nor I had any significant source of income, a college degree, or a place to raise a child. Ultimately, after weighing all of our options and considering what would be best for our daughter, we decided that adoption was the right choice for us.

We met Don and De, a couple hoping to adopt, through a family friend. They were interested in pursuing an open adoption, and we spent the next few months getting to know them as best we could. We all agreed that we wanted our adoption arrangement to be very open.

Our daughter Deanna Marie was born on July 11, 2005. Robbie and I were given alone time at the hospital say to say hello and goodbye. Then Don and De hugged us and left with Deanna, saying, "We'll see you soon." They weren't kidding. They invited us — and our families — to visit them at their home later that same day.



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Now, nearly ten years after Deanna's birth and adoption, I still have a very open arrangement with my daughter and her family. This includes phone calls, photos, and visits. Ours is just one example of an open adoption on a wide spectrum of possible open adoption arrangements.

My relationship with Deanna and her parents has continued to evolve and grow stronger. But as positive as my experience as a birth parent in an open adoption has been, my expectations have changed over the past ten years, as is only natural in any ongoing relationship. In this article, I will explain how and why my expectations have shifted, and how we have dealt with it over time in our open adoption arrangement.

Asking Questions

One of the most challenging parts of having an open adoption arrangement is setting and keeping realistic expectations. Open adoptions work best when all parties are comfortable with the level of contact. Initially, what a birth mother wants and what prospective adoptive parents want might be the same thing. But over time, those wants might change. The key is to find a healthy balance, constantly working towards an agreement that both parties find acceptable.

Before the adoption, when Robbie and I were first getting to know Don and De, we immediately felt very comfortable around them. That was very important to us. When Don and De told us they wanted to have a very open adoption arrangement, we believed them. Throughout the entire process, it always seemed like their answers to all of our questions were honest, focused on what would be best for our daughter and not necessarily based on what they thought we wanted to hear. While plenty of people warned us that a fully open adoption arrangement was probably too good to be true, we continued to believe that Don and De were being truthful when they said that they wanted us to remain part of our daughter's life even after the adoption. Still, it was a huge leap of faith, choosing to go through with the adoption without any type of written contract or agreement to enforce the openness we all verbally agreed upon.

To help us understand what openness would mean after the adoption, Robbie and I both asked lots of questions. Both he and I made this decision together, and while he and I were both concerned about the possibility of losing touch with Deanna, he was more optimistic than I initially was about the open adoption working out favorably. He also wanted to maintain open contact with Deanna after the adoption, so we both asked lots of questions. The questions listed below helped us get a better idea of what our open adoption would look like, and the answers allowed us to set our expectations accordingly.

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1. How often would we be able to visit during the first year after the adoption?

In terms of visitation during the first year post-adoption, my expectation was that I would be able to visit frequently – approximately three to six times per month. Don, De, Robbie and I all agreed that we wouldn't set strict guidelines for an exact number of visits, but that we would instead allow our comfort levels and schedules to dictate how often we would see each other.

I attended college less than a mile from Don and De's home in Raleigh, so it was easy and convenient for me to stop over before or after class. My expectations were met during the first year; we saw each other frequently, and I felt comfortable with the amount of contact. Something I didn't expect, however, was that I would feel guilty for having to occasionally decline an invitation to visit. There were times I had to say no to a visit, for fear that I would spend precious time crying or being upset. Over time, I learned that it was okay to politely decline and reschedule for another time when I felt more emotionally prepared.

2. Would visits become less frequent as Deanna got older?

I understood that in the years after the adoption, visits would become less frequent. I expected to be able to visit at least once or twice a month, depending on Don and De's availability. I assumed that might mean more visits if the right opportunities presented themselves, but again, we did not agree on a specific number of visits. Instead, we wanted our comfort level and schedules to dictate how this worked.

Overall, my expectations were met in terms of visits as Deanna got older. We did see each other less, but I still felt good about the amount of contact we had.

3. Would I ever be completely shut out from visiting or having contact?

This is probably the question that most birth mothers worry most about prior to adoption. So many people tried to warn me that our adoption wouldn't work out the way I wanted it to; that the adoptive parents would just take the baby and run. For some reason, I never believed that to be true. I can't explain exactly why, but I felt a sense of peace and comfort around Don and De. I always felt like they were honest and trustworthy people, and that they had my best interest in mind, not just their own.

Since Deanna was adopted, I've never been worried about being shut out of her life, or forbidden to see her. This is because Don and De have done a tremendous job of making me feel welcomed, appreciated, and loved. Although I personally didn't worry about being shut out, I think

it's important for adoptive parents to remember their promises to birth parents. I know plenty of fellow birth mothers who do worry, often, about the possibility of being shut out from having contact.

4. How would a move/change of location on either side affect our arrangement?

Before the adoption, I do remember having a conversation with Don and De about what would happen if they ever moved away from Raleigh. When I asked if they ever anticipated moving, Don and De were honest and said they didn't plan to, though anything was possible.

But when Deanna turned three, Don unexpectedly accepted a job in South Carolina, three hours away. At first I felt very hurt and blindsided. But I knew that being upset and disappointed wasn't going to help the situation, so I decided to make the most of it. Eventually, Don, De and I were able to have an honest discussion about the move, and I more clearly understood Don's reasons for accepting the new position. We talked about how our visits might change and how we would all have to be more flexible.

Fortunately, visiting Don, De and Deanna in South Carolina became some of my favorite memories. They lived just a short walk from the beach, and often invited me to come stay with them for long weekends. We took rides in their golf cart, rode bikes around their neighborhood, walked on the beach together, and enjoyed quality time that felt like a vacation. The three-hour distance turned out to be a positive for me, because I was able to better plan our visits ahead of time and feel more emotionally ready for them. Before their move, an invitation to visit or stop over for dinner might pop up at a moment's notice and I would feel bad if I already had plans or just wasn't up for it emotionally. After they moved, my expectations for visiting Deanna shifted, and I came to realize that we could make it work and it wouldn't weaken our relationships.

Long-Term Needs

As a birth mother, one of the long-term needs I've had over time is access to free counseling. Counseling was offered at my college, and I took advantage of that service for as long as I could until I graduated. It helped me tremendously, and I believe it is one of the biggest reasons why I was able to finally find peace in my decision to place my daughter. I learned important coping mechanisms and skills that ultimately helped me overcome the sadness and guilt that had consumed me for so long.

Although our adoption was private and we did not go through an agency, from speaking with many other birth mothers, I believe that agencies

should provide counseling services and support for birth mothers in the years following placement – or provide referrals for services if the birth parents would prefer.

I also believe that birth parent support networks can be hugely beneficial in the healing process. It would be wonderful if more adoption agencies would offer local birth mother support groups and host events to help birth parents connect with one another.

There are some national support networks that do offer support, mentoring, and friendship for fellow birth mothers. Birthmom Buds is one of those organizations that I have been personally involved in, and it has helped me tremendously. Birthmom Buds provides peer counseling, support, encouragement, and friendship to birthmoms as well as pregnant women considering adoption. Each year, they host a birth mothers retreat so birth mothers can meet and connect. They also have a mentor program for new birth mothers to be matched with a seasoned member of Birthmom Buds for peer-to-peer counseling.

I believe another long-term need for birth parents is open, ongoing communication with their child's family. I've spoken with too many birth mothers who feel as though they have been shut out after placement. One of the most important long-term needs for birth mothers is to simply feel welcome and appreciated – to never feel as though they have to beg to be part of their child's life. A simple card with a picture and an update, or a text to say "we love you," can literally mean the world.

Different Expectations, Same Family

Overall, my expectations now compared with my expectations at the time of the adoption have changed. I expected to remain a part of my daughter's life, and I have. But I didn't expect I would ever have a long-distance relationship with her. Two years ago, Don accepted a new position and was transferred to the west coast. Today, Deanna is nine years old, and is living in sunny California.

The much greater distance has made us all rethink what openness from afar looks like. Deanna is still able to talk to me on the phone, and Don and De have done a great job of answering her questions as they come up. Robbie also keeps in touch with her, talking with her and visiting when he can. But we have all had to shift our expectations to fit this new reality.

Visits are obviously far less frequent now, but we have shared some special memories these past few years. When I married my husband, Aaron, in 2013, Deanna was a flower girl in our wedding, and that was truly one of

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the best days of my life. Don, De and Deanna still make trips back to the east coast to visit family, and they always make sure to visit us while they are in town. Facebook, text messages, phone calls and emails have also helped tremendously with keeping us all connected. De does an excellent job of keeping everybody connected with their lives. She is always posting new pictures of Deanna on Facebook, which allows me to see how much fun she's been having in California. I love being able to see these new experiences Deanna is having and share in them from afar, knowing that she is growing up in a great home with a wonderful family. Seeing her happiness reaffirms my decision to place her for adoption. She is experiencing the life I wanted to give to her but couldn't provide for her at the time.

Open adoption has allowed me to establish and maintain a strong, loving relationship with my daughter. Aaron and I are expecting our first baby in June, and soon we will have the honor and privilege of introducing Deanna to her new baby brother. We are looking forward to this new chapter in our lives, and seeing how our open adoption continues to evolve and strengthen over time.

Additional Reading: NCFCA Articles on Birth Parents and Open Adoption

- *Adoption Advocate* No. 41, November 2011, "My Perspective on Open Adoption and Recommendations for Birthparents" (also by Amy Hutton Sink), available online at adoptioncouncil.org/publications/2011/11/adoption-advocate-no-41
- *Adoption Advocate* No. 45, March 2012, "Birthparent Counseling in Policy and Practice," available online at adoptioncouncil.org/publications/2012/03/adoption-advocate-no-45
- *Adoption Advocate* No. 52, October 2012, "Educating Hospitals About Adoption: How Hospital Staff Can Support Parents Considering an Adoption Plan," available online at adoptioncouncil.org/publications/2012/10/adoption-advocate-no-52
- *Adoption Advocate* No. 58, April 2013, "Birthparent Issues of Grief and Loss," available online at adoptioncouncil.org/publications/2013/04/adoption-advocate-no-58
- *Adoption Advocate* No. 74, August 2014, "Choosing an Adoption Agency," available online at adoptioncouncil.org/publications/2014/08/adoption-advocate-no-74
- *Adoption Advocate* No. 78, December 2014, "The Post-Adoption Life: Supporting Adoptees, Birth Parents, and Families After Adoption," available online at adoptioncouncil.org/publications/2014/12/adoption-advocate-no-78

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Amy Hutton Sink is the birth mother of a nine-year-old daughter placed via open adoption. Amy has been featured in stories about open adoption in the *Raleigh News and Observer*, *The Daily Reveille*, and *NC Catholics*. She has also co-presented "How to De-Freakify Open Adoption" at an Open Adoption Symposium held at the University of Richmond School of Law. Amy and her husband Aaron currently reside in Raleigh, where Amy works as a marketing director.



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