

How two families are navigating open adoption after foster care

By Meg St.-Esprit

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It is a fractured picture of parenthood: She is a mother of six in the D.C. area, but none of her minor children live with her. Her eldest daughter, who is 20, splits time between her home and a foster home. Her three boys are bouncing around in foster care while the agency tries to place them with extended family members. Two of her daughters have been adopted by a family who lives about 25 minutes away.

The children were removed from her care five years ago amid allegations of abuse and neglect, and she faced criminal charges. After she failed to meet goals for reunification, the court system changed the two girls' goal to adoption and finalized their placement with a local couple who have two other daughters. It was a family the girls had been with for four years at that point.

The adoptive parents decided to maintain a relationship with the girls' mom. (The family agreed to speak with us on the condition that their names be withheld to protect their privacy.) The girls' parents believe biological family ties were important to the children's well-being and emotional health.

Open adoption, or the practice of maintaining an ongoing relationship with biological family members after a child is adopted, is becoming more prevalent in the United States. An estimated 95 percent of private infant adoptions are open, according to the Donaldson Adoption Institute.

Yet open adoption is much less common when children are adopted from foster care. Stigma surrounding the reasons children enter foster care and are later adopted — familial addiction, poverty, neglect, instability and abuse — may make foster/adoptive parents hesitant to maintain a connection with biological families.

There are numerous studies showing the benefit of open private infant adoption, but little attention has been given to open adoption after foster care. Still, many professionals are pushing for foster-to-adoption families to build relationships with biological families, saying that maintaining those ties can benefit everyone involved.

In the case of the mom in the District, she sees the girls about eight times a year, but she says it's not easy for her to visit.

“I don’t have that luxury to wake up to them, make them breakfast, watch TV or go to the park like we used to,” she says. “It’s very hurtful; sometimes I have to pull myself together just to get through a visit.”

The girls also have complicated feelings about adoption. “It was hard for me that I had to go to this adopted family instead of my mom,” one said. “I know that she couldn’t do her mommy jobs, but I still want to live with her because she is still the best mom — but my [adoptive] mom is the best, too.”

Rachel Hoyt, a licensed clinical social worker in Chicago who has adopted two children from foster care and fostered several more through reunification, is passionate about open adoption after foster care — both professionally and personally for her children.

She didn’t always feel this way. In her early years as a social worker, she focused mostly on what would be the best placement for the kids, many of whom were removed from their parents for difficult reasons, she says. It was easy to lay blame on biological parents. As she became more involved, though, she realized that most of the parents were just kids who had never had anyone intervene for them or give them the help they needed.

Recognizing that the cycle of brokenness was affecting generations changed Hoyt’s approach. “The reason that some of the kids I fostered were able to so smoothly return home to their parents was because of the relationship we built,” Hoyt says. She notes that it is not always easy, as the issues that often necessitate foster care can add stress to an already complicated situation.

“It became really important to me that foster parents and birthparents worked together,” she says. And if a foster care situation ends in adoption, Hoyt says, it is even more important that kids continue to have a relationship with their biological family.

“They can see what the situation is — learn from the ups and downs, learn to love somebody who has mental health or substance issues or chronic instability,” she says. “They can learn how to reconcile their story, that it’s not a reflection of how much their parents love them.”

Jamie Greenberg, a permanency caseworker for Allegheny County Children, Youth, and Families in the Pittsburgh area, has seen the evolution of open adoption in the foster care system. Pennsylvania is one of 29 states that have the option of legally enforceable open-adoption agreements, and Greenberg has mediated visitation contracts between adoptive and birth families. She notes that many families decide together to pursue informal agreements rather than wade through legal waters — which can be messy and complicated.

And some adoptive families balk at the idea. “Open adoption clashes with adoptive parents’ idea of building their own family, because they have to open their minds and hearts to another group of people,” Greenberg says.

In Pennsylvania, any child over age 12 must consent to their adoption, and the open adoption can help teens feel more secure in their choice, she adds. “Knowing that contact with their biological families is court-ordered and guaranteed helps them feel more comfortable with adoption and strengthens their bonds with their adoptive parents,” she says.

In another family, 4-year-old Emma is growing up in an open adoption after being placed in foster care as an infant. She has been with her adoptive parents, Corinne and Joseph, since she was 14 months old. They finalized the adoption when Emma was 3½ and have maintained a relationship with multiple members of her biological family. (The family asked that their last names and city of residence be withheld to protect Emma’s privacy.)

Emma’s great-grandmother, Mary, 70, felt guilt when the baby was removed from her grandson’s care but said it was not feasible for her to raise an infant.

“The first family Emma was placed with, it was just not a good match,” Mary says. “They wanted to immediately take her and move to Florida; it was a mess.” When the couple found out they could not move away while Emma’s parents were still attempting to reunify, the baby was moved to Corinne and Joseph’s home.

“I got through the guilt and the shame. I had to realize I can’t raise her, and God knows I can’t,” Mary says. Through tears, she says she prayed, and eventually met with Corinne and Emma at a diner. “I knew, as soon as I met [Corinne], that I didn’t have to worry about Emma anymore.”

Mary considers Corinne family now. She, along with Emma’s other great-grandmother, spend birthdays and holidays with the family. They laugh and share meals, and Mary has no doubt she will always be a part of Emma’s life. The entire family — biological and adopted — is invested in Emma’s well-being.

Recently, Emma’s biological mother has also begun visiting. Corinne and Joseph have worked hard to keep the lines of communication open while Emma’s parents struggle with addiction. Corinne explains addiction in age-appropriate ways and tries to never disparage Emma’s biological parents.

“We emphasize that they aren’t bad people — that everyone hurts and struggles, and that they love her so much,” Corinne says.

Emma was relaxed and happy during the last visit, and has been working on filling a box with art projects to give to her birth mom the next time they get together. Emma struggles with disorganized attachment to her adoptive parents, Corrine says, which is common after a child has been in as many homes as she has. But her family hopes that continued openness and access to her entire history will help Emma with her emotional journey.

Corinne is thankful that everyone works hard to maintain these relationships, even when things are challenging. “The [great]-grandmas have been so amazing and supportive,” she says. “I am so glad that Emma has them. It’s easy for me to offer an open relationship, but I give them a ton of credit. And they are her family — bottom line.”

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