



ONGOING CONNECTIONS

Parenting Curriculum Trainer's Guide

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ONGOING CONNECTIONS (PARENT COMPONENT)

Trainer's Preparation

Contents and Training Process

This unit is designed to prepare prospective adoptive parents and others interested in offering a permanent family to older youth in the foster care system. It will assist them in exploring the importance of permanence for the youth as well as the benefits gained when the youth maintain connections with significant people from their past after they join a family.

Preparing to Train

- Set the room up with tables in a U shape open at the end where the trainer will stand. Chairs for participants should be on the outside of the U.
- Review the materials and have a grasp of content and flow of the meeting.
- Practice the “String Exercise” with co-workers prior to the meeting so you will know how to tie and how to respond to where the yarn is cut. (page 16)
- Practice the “Annoying Habit” activity. (page 25)
- Make copies of handouts for small group activity.
- Make copies of the Participant’s Handbook.
- The meeting is designed to be three hours in length.
- The meeting allows for a 15 minute break. Review the materials and plan the most appropriate place for the break.
- Have refreshments available during break.
- You may want to have tokens (candy, small prizes) available to give to volunteers and reporter/recorders.
- A kitchen timer is a good way to time the small group activities.

Required Materials/Equipment and Room Set-Up

Easel, flip chart, and markers

Paper and pencils/pens for participants

5 small pieces of paper for each participant for the “Five Connections” activity (page 8)

4 pieces of card stock with holes punched and yarn threaded to form name tag to hang around participants’ necks for the “String Exercise”

Skein of yarn

Scissors

Prepared Flips or Power Point Slides

(The list of flips or power point slides is in the order in which they will be used.)

- **Expectations**
- **By the end of this meeting you will:**
 - Gain understanding of your connections, their importance, and their relationship to your identity.
 - Identify and explain how maintaining existing connections will serve as a tool for promoting permanency for youth in the foster care system.
 - Demonstrate that openness is a continuum of varying degrees based on the connections and needs of the youth.
 - Identify the benefits of maintaining connections for all the parties involved in the permanency process.
 - Examine the importance of the birth family to youth, their self-concept, and their identity. Identify connections that may be important to youth who may enter your family.
 - Identify ways to maintain and support youths’ connections to birth families and other important connections youth may have.
 - Identify strategies for managing the ongoing connections for youth while integrating them into adoptive/permanent families.
- **A connection is a person, place, or thing to which an individual feels closeness. Connections help us define who we are.**

- **Components of a positive self-concept**

- Lovable
- Capable
- Responsible
- Worthwhile

- **Continuum of Openness**

Low degree
of openness

High degree
of openness

- **Partnership**

Two or more people who both receive something of value to them by working with the other(s). *They may not have the same goal; however, they both receive something of value from the relationship.*

- **Instructions for Small Group Exercise on Partnership**

- ✓ Divide participants into small groups.
- ✓ Using the list of possible connections the youth may want to maintain that was developed earlier, assign each group connections to use in their small group.
- ✓ Ask them to identify ways they could work in partnership with the youth's identified connections.
- ✓ Each group should identify a reporter/recorder to record their responses and to report back to the large group.

- **Maintaining Connections for Youth**

Instructions for Small Group Activity:

- ✓ Return to the small groups you were in for the previous activity.
- ✓ Each group will discuss your assigned case scenario.
- ✓ Remember, you will need a reporter/recorder.
- ✓ Discuss the following specific areas with regard to maintaining connections for your assigned youth, and write your answers on the flip chart page you have been provided.
 - Ways to maintain the connections
 - Setting boundaries among all parties involved that will avoid potential problems in the relationship

- Negotiating the actual plan for connections and re-negotiating should the need arise
- ✓ You will have twelve minutes to complete the activity.

Where Do We Go From Here?

- **Identify ongoing connections to be maintained.**
- **Meet with all the parties involved to formulate a plan for how the connections will be maintained.**
- **Once the plan is finalized, complete the agreement for ongoing connections, review it with all parties, and have each sign it.**
- **Make sure everyone involved has a copy of the agreement.**
- **Periodically review the ongoing connections and renegotiate when necessary.**

Module 1: Introduction to and Purpose of Training

Large Group Activity

Introduce the session.

Have participants introduce themselves and ask them to identify one thing they want to learn or take away from this meeting. Record their responses on a flip chart.

Review their expectations and identify any that will not be met during the preparation. Assure them that at the end of the meeting you will discuss ways they can meet the expectations that will not be addressed in this meeting.

Discuss purpose of this training.

Trainer Comments

- Connections are important for all of us. During this meeting we will look at the importance of maintaining the connections that already exist for older youth who are part, or may become part, of your family. We will explore ways to keep the youth connected while incorporating them into your family unit.

- Review the following with the participants. By the end of this session you will:
 - Gain understanding of your connections, their importance, and their relationship to your identity.
 - Identify and explain how maintaining existing connections will serve as a tool for promoting permanency for youth in the foster care system.
 - Demonstrate that openness is a continuum of varying degrees based on the connections and needs of the youth.
 - Identify the benefits of maintaining connections for all the parties involved in the permanency process.
 - Examine the importance of the birth family to youth, their self-concept, and their identity. Identify connections that may be important to youth who may enter your family.
 - Identify ways to maintain and support youths' connections to birth families and other important connections youth may have.



Time:

15 minutes



- Identify strategies for managing the ongoing connections for youth while integrating them into adoptive/permanent families.
- Review participants' list of expectations and tell them which ones will be addressed in this session and which will not. Ask them to think about how they might meet expectations that will not be addressed in this session. Tell them you will be glad to talk with them about ways to meet those expectations.

Module 2: Exploring My Connections

Large Group Activity

Significant People from Your Youth



Directions

- ✓ Ask participants to think back to their childhood and teenage years; let's say between the ages of eight and eighteen. "Who were the most important or significant people to you in that period of your life? Who had a lasting impact on you?"
- ✓ Each participant should list at least three people and no more than five.



Questions to explore the importance of these connections in their lives: *(Have a brief discussion after each of the following questions.)*

Who were the people that you listed?

Why were these people significant and how did they impact your sense of self?

How might your life been different if these people had not been a part of it?

Are any of these people still part of your life and, if so, what role do they play?



Time:

30 minutes



Trainer Comments

- Acknowledge the different people identified and the roles they have played in the participants' lives. Someone in the group may identify a relationship that was not a positive one. Discuss how even stressed or negative relationships can have a powerful impact and influence a person's attitudes, goals, and future relationships.
- Reinforce the participants' comments on the impact the people have had on their lives and how their lives would have been different if these people had not been a part of it.
- Point out that many of them still have a connection to the people they identified. Even if their significant people have passed on or moved away, they stay connected through memories and the influence the persons had on them.
- Remind the participants that having a connection to significant people from their past did not lessen their connection to their parents. Everyone has room in their lives for strong connections with a host of people.
- Point out that some of the participants identified siblings as important people in their youth, and note whether that relationship continues to be important.
- Reinforce that the ages we explored, eight to eighteen, are when we all form our sense of identity and self-concept. None of them would be the person they are today if they had been forced to give up their connection to significant people.

Present Connections

Directions

- ✓ Look at the current connections participants have by conducting the "Five Connections" activity.
- ✓ Define connection using the prepared flip and then ask participants to identify their connections. List their responses on a flip chart.
- ✓ Have the participants look at the list and select five of the connections that are most important to them right now. Have them write one connection on each of the five pieces of paper provided.



If an important connection has been omitted, they may write it on one of the pieces of paper.

- ✓ Take them through the activity by having them picture themselves with all of their connections and then have them give up their connections one by one. After each connection is given up, ask participants to identify how they are feeling. They will be left with one connection at the end of the activity. Focus on what that connection is and why it was important for them to keep it.
- ✓ Summarize the activity by asking the participants how this activity relates to the youth they are or may be parenting and their desire to maintain connections?

Trainer Comments

- A connection is a person, place, or thing to which an individual feels closeness. Connections help us define who we are.
- Before starting the exercise, emphasize the point that this can be an emotional activity and you want participants to take care of themselves. Ask them to try to complete the activity as it is a valuable way to gain an understanding of the youth they are or may be parenting. However, if it becomes too difficult, tell them they may choose to stop the activity. Tell them that you will ask them to share briefly why they could not complete the activity at the end of the exercise.
- Take the participants through the exercise by using the following dialogue or your version of it.
- Once you have selected the five most important connections you have right now, picture yourself with these five connections. All these people, places, or things are important to you. They are the essence of who you are and how you define yourself. Think about the part each plays in your life. Visualize how each connection contributes to your identity and your sense of emotional well being. What part does each connection play in determining who you are? Once you have that image in your mind, I want you to contemplate this:
 - You must give up one of the five connections you have selected. You must delete that connection from your list. You can no longer have that connection as a part of your life, as a part of who you are.



- Please select the connection you will give up and drop it on the floor beside you.
- Ask one or two participants to identify the connection they gave up. Now that you no longer have the connection, how do you feel? (*Ask one or two participants to describe their feelings.*)
- Most of you are probably feeling OK because you still have four important connections left. After all, don't we all choose to give up the connection that is least essential to our happiness, well being, and identity?
- Re-picture yourself now with your four remaining connections. These are the components of your identity, the four most important connections in your life. Now imagine that you will have to give up one of your four remaining connections.
 - Which one will it be? Please choose and drop that connection on the floor.
- Now you are down to three connections. How are you feeling? (*Ask for a couple responses.*) Again, ask a couple of people to identify the connection they gave up.
- Probably you're not feeling as self-assured and confident as you were before. After all you are slowly losing the connections that make you who you are. I am sorry that you had to give up another connection; however, that's just how life is sometimes.
- Now that you have three remaining connections, it is important that you again picture yourself with your three remaining connections. How important are they to you? With each loss, the connections that remain, in all probability, become more important.
- I hate to be the bearer of bad news; however, it is required that you give up another connection. Choose one of your remaining three connections to give up and drop it on the floor beside you. (*Each time you ask participants to give up a connection you will see it take longer for them to make a decision. As this occurs tell them that if they cannot decide you will make the decision for them. And, if someone does not give up a connection when asked, as the trainer you should choose one of their remaining connections and drop it on the floor beside them.*)

- As before, ask one or two participants to identify the connection they gave up and describe how they are feeling. Continue by acknowledging the following feelings.
- You are probably feeling very incomplete, perhaps angry, and maybe even desperate because the essence of who you are is being taken away. Giving up the connections that are most important is not easy. Since you are now down to only two connections, these are probably extremely important to you and ones that you would probably have a very hard time choosing between. However, that is exactly what you must do because you need to give up one of your two remaining connections. What are they? For many people the final two connections they keep are family and religion/church/faith. Sometimes friends. Please choose another connection to give up and drop it on the floor. You must have only one remaining connection. Again, if you cannot choose, I will do it for you.
- Now that you have only one connection left, what are some of your feelings? (*Get some responses.*)
- For many, there are feelings of helplessness and hopelessness. You may become hardened after having to give up so much and just say, “**Who cares, what difference does it make now?**” Regardless of your feelings, they are probably not positive ones.
- Look at your remaining connection, what do you have left?
- The final connection that most people keep is family or faith/religion. Think about it. When we must choose and are left with only one connection that we can keep, family is the most important for many people. Now think about youth in the foster care system. What is the connection they risk losing, sometimes first, if everyone playing a part in their lives does not work to help them maintain it?
- **Right! Family.**
- This was only an exercise. You can pick up your lost connections from the floor and still have all of them. They have not really been taken away. Those people, places, and things that help you determine who you are, are still a part of you. It is painful, however, to contemplate and have to choose, even in an exercise, the connections we would give up and to be threatened with the possibility of someone else making the choice for us.
- For youth in the foster care system this is not an exercise, it is their life! Unless social workers, supervisors, foster parents, and the legal

system make a concerted effort to keep youth connected, they are removed or cut off from many, if not all, of the connections that are important to them. Is it any wonder we have angry, hostile, and depressed youth with whom we work? Can you understand the feelings of helplessness and hopelessness that many youth exhibit? Or that attitude of not seeming to care about anything or anyone that is sometimes so exasperating.

- For youth to have a permanent family, we expect them to give up all their past connections and “start over.” Did you do that? When you went to college, got married, or moved into another phase of your life, did you give up all your previous connections? The answer is probably “NO.” We add to our connections and the more people we have that care about us and are there to support us, the better off we are! We must all work together to help youth add to their identity and network of support through permanency, not lose any of it.
- In this exercise we explore your connections with the significant people from your past and your present connections. Most people find family and other significant people are always a part of our support system. You probably noticed that many of the people who are part of your support system/your connections have been part of your life for a long time. You have added new and important connections; however, you have also retained many connections from as far back as childhood.,
- As you think about the youth you are parenting or considering parenting who need a permanent family, ask yourself this question: **“Why should we ask, no expect, youth who need permanency to give up their connections?” If connections are important to us, they are important to these youth also!**

Module 3: Identity, Self-concept, and a Youth's Connections

Large Group Activity



Directions

- ✓ Define identity.
- ✓ Ask the participants for their definition of identity. After they have responded, review the definition that will be used during this training incorporating their definitions as much as possible.
 - *Identity is simply our perception of who we are.*
- ✓ Next ask them to identify ways our identity is formed.
 - Refer back to the “five connections” exercise they just completed. Ask them to identify ways that the exercise helped them look at their own identity and how it could help them in their work with youth in their family who may want to maintain connections.
- ✓ What is self-concept? Ask the participants for their definition of self-concept.
- ✓ Review with them the definition that will be used, again incorporating their ideas as much as possible.
 - *Self-concept is how we feel about who we are.*
- ✓ Review the components of a positive self-concept.
- ✓ On a flip chart have listed the four components of a positive self-concept:
 - lovable
 - capable



Time:

15 minutes

- responsible
- worthwhile

- ✓ What is the relationship between identity, self-concept, and a youth's connections?

Questions to ask participants:

1. How do a youth's connections impact his/her identity and self-concept?

Let participants give you their ideas then reinforce and paraphrase to cover the following:

- Much of any individual's sense of identity comes from the birth family, whether or not they are living together.
- Self-concept is related to how a person perceives the way others see and think about him/her, so it too is impacted by the connection to the birth family.

2. What would losing important connections do to a youth's or for that matter anyone's sense of identity and self-concept?

Again let participants answer this question and reinforce the following:

- It changes or alters one's sense of identity.
- It impacts how a person defines himself or herself.
- It impacts how a person feels about who he/she is, especially if the connection is cut off by others. It makes the person feel unworthy.

Trainer's Comments

- Reinforce the point that our identity and self-concept are strongly linked to our connections.



- Losing connections alters our sense of identity and self-concept, sometimes negatively. Adding connections also alters our sense of identity and self-concept; however, it is more likely to be a positive change rather than a negative one.
- The more people we are connected to in a positive way, the better we feel about ourselves.

Connections – Who and Why?

Large Group Demonstration and Brainstorming Activity



Directions

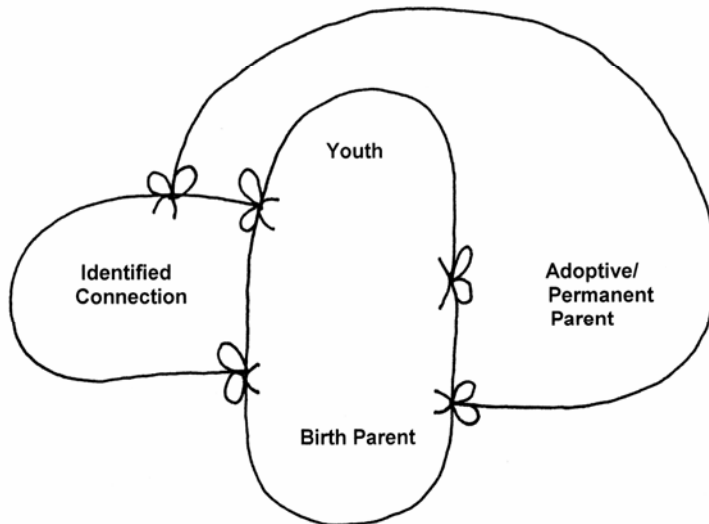
- ✓ Ask participants the following questions and record their responses on a flip chart.
 - First, let's look at the important connections a youth might have. With whom might a youth want to maintain connections? (list responses)
 - Now let's look at the advantages of maintaining connections.
 - What are the advantages/benefits of maintaining connections for the youth? (list responses)
- ✓ There are also advantages/benefits for the adoptive/permanent family of the youth maintaining connections.
- ✓ Conduct the following demonstration that illustrates how new connections and attachments are built on those that already exist.
- ✓ Conduct the activity and then ask participants to identify other advantages/benefits for the adoptive/permanent family. (list responses)



Instructions for Conducting the “String Exercise”

- ✓ Emphasize the importance of partnership in achieving attachment.
 - It takes partnership among social workers, birth parents, other significant connections in a youth’s life, foster parents, and adoptive/permanent parents to assist a youth in feeling attached to his/her permanent family while still maintaining a connection to other important people in his/her life.
- ✓ Discuss how attachment builds on previous attachments.
 - The demonstration we are about to do shows how one attachment builds on and is connected to others in the youth’s life.
- ✓ Ask for four volunteers to represent a youth, a birth parent, a significant attachment figure for the youth, and an adoptive/permanent parent. Have four name cards available: one with youth written on it, one with birth parent, one with adoptive/permanent parent, and leave the fourth one blank.
- ✓ Ask the participants to identify an important adult attachment figure to whom a youth needing permanence might want to maintain a connection. Write their choice on the fourth name card.
- ✓ Tell the group that the yarn you will use represents the attachment between the child and birth parent. Tie the yarn to demonstrate the child/parent attachment using the diagram that follows to tie all the participants in the demonstration together as it progresses.
- ✓ Add the identified attachment; tie that person into the demonstration.
- ✓ Add the adoptive/permanent parent and illustrate the attachment.

The diagram below will show you how to tie together the youth and his/her connections with the yarn demonstrating the connection. Tie the youth and the birth parent together first. Then add the identified connection and finally the adoptive/permanent parent.



- ✓ Talk to the adoptive/permanent parent about perceived threats from other relationships.
 - As the adoptive/permanent parent for this youth, you may feel threatened by “your child’s” connections to the birth parent and this other important connection in his/her life. After all, the youth is a permanent member of your family now. You could fear these connections will prevent him/her from attaching to your family. Sometimes it is especially hard for the mom in the adoptive/permanent family to hear her child referring to someone else as mom.
- ✓ Give the adoptive/permanent parent volunteer a pair of scissors and tell them they can get rid of any relationship they see as a threat by simply cutting the yarn. Have them cut the yarn wherever they want to cut off the connection.
- ✓ Once the cut is made, discuss what has happened to the relationship with the adoptive/permanent parent.
 - *(In many situations, when the volunteer cuts the yarn to cut off the connection, the adoptive/permanent parent is cut out of the loop also. Even if this does not happen, have*

everyone back up to show how the attachments are not as close as they were before. No matter where the volunteer cuts the yarn, use it to demonstrate that their attachment to the youth is impaired, if not cut off, by cutting out the important attachment figures in the youth's life.)

- ✓ Ask the participants to discuss how attachments build on previous attachments and connections, and the reasons to support the youth's connections.
- ✓ Why has maintaining existing connections when entering a permanent family not been pursued for older youth in the past?
- ✓ Ask participants to identify, from their perspective, reasons why maintaining connections has not been pursued by the agency or embraced by adoptive/permanent families in the past? (list responses)
 - After they have given their responses, remind them that the current adoption practice evolved with infant adoption. In the past, most infant adoptions were closed. As we learned more about the benefits of openness in adoption, both infant adoptions and the adoption of older children and youth have become more open.
- ✓ What did this demonstration show you about the importance and benefits of maintaining connections for the youth you are parenting or will parent? ⁽¹⁾



Trainer's Comments

- When we look at the questions surrounding ongoing connections for youth in their entirety, we can identify benefits for both the youth and the adoptive/permanent family.
- For the youth there is the comfort of knowing that the important people from their past are OK and still a part of their life in some way.
- Maintaining connections also enhances the youth's sense of identity and self-concept.

(1) Adapted from Child Welfare Institute, Model Approach to Partnerships in Parenting Group Preparation and Selection, 1992.

- Of great importance to the youth is the fact that you are allowing them to maintain connections. The youth feel validated with the knowledge that the adoptive/permanent family accepts them for who they are and values all components of their life, including their connections. Additionally, some studies have shown that the acceptance of the birth family by the adoptive/permanent family is a positive predictor for successful adoption/permanence.
- For the adoptive/permanent family, maintaining connections provides valuable information about the youth and an avenue to obtain birth family medical information, which will be relevant for the youth later in life.
- The youth's existing connections can be used by the adoptive/permanent family as a foundation for building their attachment to the youth.
- Allowing the youth to maintain connections demonstrates the adoptive/permanent family's acceptance of the youth as a unique individual who is connected to others and can connect to the adoptive/permanent family.
- As the adoptive/permanent parent for these youth, you must be cognizant of the fact that what you are doing is "shared parenting." Just as all parents share parenting with day care providers, teachers, and others who take responsibility for parts of their children's lives, you are sharing the parenting of the youth with the birth parents and other significant people from the youths' past. While you will be the "parenting parent," the youth will still have birth parents and others who will always be significant parts of their lives, if not by their physical presence, by their emotional connection. As the adoptive/permanent parent for youth who have existing connections, it is important that you acknowledge and address their need to stay connected from early in your relationship. Maintaining connections helps youth address the emotional issues relating to their not living with their birth families and understand why this was necessary. Allowing youth to maintain these connections does not lessen or impede your role as the parent. Actually, by allowing the youth to maintain their important connections, you will in all probability enhance your parental status with the youth.

Module 4: The Adoptive/Permanent Family – What about Us?

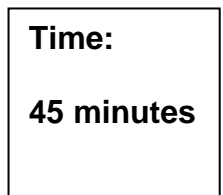
Fears and Concerns about Maintaining Connections

Directions

- ✓ Introduce the concept of openness in adoptive and permanent placements.
- ✓ Ask participants to identify some of the fears, concerns, and/or challenges they may face in trying to maintain ongoing connections for their child/youth.
- ✓ List their responses on a flip chart.

Trainer's Comments

- Adoptive and permanent parents are often hesitant to allow their child/youth to maintain connections with birth family members and other significant attachment figures from the youth's past.
- Acknowledge the challenges of integrating a youth into their family as a permanent member while working to maintain ongoing connections with important people from his/her past.
- Many adoptive/permanent parents have fears about the connections that their child/youth may want to continue. The handbook you will receive at the end of this session contains an article that will help you explore the fears and concerns many families have and give you information to help alleviate those fears and concerns.
- Point out the fact that previous demonstrations in this training and the research completed surrounding open adoption have shown that youth can and do attach to their adoptive/permanent families and are not confused about who their parents are or the role of the birth family in their life.
- Reinforce the knowledge that allowing a youth to maintain connections enhances the youth's self-esteem, feelings of acceptance, and attachment to the adoptive/permanent family.



- Emphasize that support is a key component to success for everyone involved. Point out that families are encouraged to begin work with a family counselor/therapist from the beginning in order to have in place the support and guidance the counselor can offer. Also point out that openness can be in many different forms. Adoptive/permanent parents' fears often arise because it is assumed that maintaining connections means face to face contact. In the next activity we will look at the different degrees of openness that can occur.

The Continuum of Openness in Connections

Large Group Brainstorm and Lecture/Demonstration

Directions

- ✓ Discuss the fears that were identified and acknowledge that often adoptive/permanent families believe maintaining connections means they must have face to face contact with the birth family/connections of the youth.
- ✓ Emphasize that openness is a continuum and can involve many different types of contact.
- ✓ Introduce the continuum diagram and ask participants to identify different types of contact that are possible between youth and their birth families.
- ✓ Place all of their ideas regarding different types of contact on the continuum. Ask them where they think they would fall on the continuum and plot their responses.

Low degree of openness

High degree of openness

✓ *Some responses may include:*

- *No contact or discussion of birth family or other connections*
- *Encouraging youth to discuss his/her birth family and important connections*
- *Phone calls or e-mails between youth and birth family members or other identified connections*
- *Occasional supervised visits*
- *Sharing the youth's lifebook and allowing him/her to talk about birth family*
- *Regular visits with birth family members or other significant people*
- *Regularly scheduled visits with siblings*
- *Identified birth family member or connections included as part of the adoptive/permanent family's "extended family"*



- *Letters between the youth and identified connections exchanged through the agency*

✓ The completed continuum will resemble the following:

Low degree of openness

High degree of openness

No contact No discussion of birth family	Encourage discussion about connections	Phone calls/e- mails	Occasional supervised visits	Regular visits with siblings	Regular visits with other connections	Connection included as part of ext. family
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✓ Show the DVD/video developed for this project. In this DVD, youth and their adoptive parents discuss ways they have benefited by maintaining connections with birth family members.



Trainer's Comments

- There are many different ways to maintain connections and degrees of openness in adoption/permanence.
- For youth who need permanence and want to remain connected to important people from their past, there is a way to allow that connection that can be satisfactory to the youth and to his/her adoptive/permanent family. It may be as simple as acknowledging that the youth does have connections to birth family and other significant people and encouraging him to talk about it. Or, it may mean actual contact with the birth family or other significant people.
- Summarize the activity and bridge to the remaining sections by stating that in order to maintain connections for youth, regardless of the level of openness, it is imperative that a positive attitude be maintained and that careful planning occurs to insure success.
- As we move through the remainder of this meeting, we will look at ways to accomplish both.

Keeping It Positive

Interactive Demonstration and Group Discussion

Directions

- ✓ Acknowledge the challenges of maintaining connections for a youth. Affirm that it is often difficult for adoptive parents to remain positive about the youth's connections, especially if they see them as causing the youth to have problems sorting out the roles of the "parent figures" in his/her life.
- ✓ As a way of demonstrating that we are all human and how we sometimes have difficulty ourselves in sorting out the connections in the youth's life, conduct the "Annoying Habit" activity. It will show how our relationship with the youth might be impacted if we do not keep a positive perspective regarding the youth's ongoing connections.

Instructions for Conducting the "Annoying Habit" Activity

- ✓ Get a volunteer who is willing to reveal an annoying habit of his or her spouse. Be sure to point out that you are looking for a habit, not a personality trait. Give an example, such as leaving dirty clothes on the floor rather than putting them in the hamper.
- ✓ Avoid selecting someone who wants to discuss the habit of a roommate. It is best to use a spouse or live-in loved one.
- ✓ To conduct the activity, sit in front of the volunteer and have that person describe the annoying habit.
- ✓ Start the demonstration by saying *"Let's pretend I have spent the weekend at your house. It is Sunday morning and we are alone. I begin talking with you about your loved one."*
- ✓ Continue by describing and exaggerating the habit and the volunteer's annoyance. Confirm your annoyance of the habit and belittle the person with the annoying habit. Be persistent and firm with your dislike of the habit.
- ✓ Push until you see either a change in facial expression or hear a defensive response.
- ✓ If you do not see either after one minute, ask the volunteer how much longer he or she will allow you to go on.



- ✓ Stop the demonstration and thank the volunteer. Be sure to ask the volunteer and the spouse/significant other how they are feeling.
- ✓ Make sure the volunteer and the spouse/significant other are all right before you process with the group.
- ✓ Remind the group that you were pretending.
- ✓ After conducting the activity, ask the participants what this activity tells them about how they should react to the youth's connections. (2)



Trainer's Comments

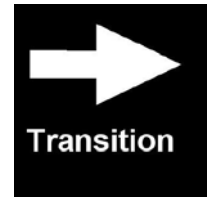
- There are many different ways to maintain connections and degrees of openness in adoption/permanence.
- It is imperative that a positive attitude be maintained and that careful planning occurs to insure success.
- Be sure that the group states or, if they do not, that you emphasize that, as we defined identity and self-concept, our connections are a key component in both. By being cut off from his/her important connections, the youth may perceive that you do not accept who he/she is.
- By speaking negatively about the youth's connections, you will appear to be speaking negatively about him/her. It is important to keep a positive attitude toward the youth's connections. Remember, we can talk negatively about the people we love but we get defensive when someone else does.
- Keeping a youth connected to important people says to him/her "I value who you are and the people and things that are important to you."

(2) Adapted from Child Welfare Institute, Model Approach to Partnerships in Parenting, Group Preparation and Selection, 1992.

Transition

Summarize this section by again acknowledging that, while important and advantageous, this is difficult work for both the youth and the permanent family.

Bridge to the next sections by stressing that as a group you will be exploring how to build partnerships with the youth's connections and also how to plan for successful connections, for the youth, significant people, and the adoptive/permanent family



Module 5: Making It Work

Building Partnerships with the Youth's Connections

Small Group Exercise and Large Group Discussion



Directions

- ✓ Define partnership.
 - Two or more people who both receive something of value to them by working with the other(s). *They may not have the same goal; however, they both receive something of value from the relationship.*
- ✓ Conduct small group exercise.



Instructions for Small Group Exercise

- ✓ Divide participants into small groups.
- ✓ Using the list of possible connections the youth may want to maintain, that was developed earlier, assign each group connections to use in their small group.
- ✓ Ask them to identify ways they could work in partnership with the youth's identified connections. *(Give each group as many connections as is necessary to make sure all the connections are assigned. You may need to give them a couple of examples to get them started [i.e., talking with the youth's grandmother about the type of contact that will be maintained; if siblings are in a separate placement, meeting or talking with their parent/caregiver about contact among the siblings.])*

Time:

45 minutes

- ✓ Each group should identify a reporter/recorder to record their responses and to report back to the large group. Give them eight to ten minutes to develop their list of strategies for working with the youth's connections.
- ✓ Come back together as a large group and ask each group to report on their strategies.
- ✓ Record the responses on a flip chart. Get one or two responses from each group and add only new strategies to the flip chart. Keep rotating among the groups until all responses have been recorded.
- ✓ Be sure to thank the reporter/recorder for each group and acknowledge the work done by the group members.



Trainer's Comments

- Part of planning for the success of maintaining connections is having a working strategy for your initial contact with the connections. You have planned ways to begin that negotiation of contact.
- This process will begin the building of a working relationship with the youth's connections that will allow for successful connections in the future.
- Our next activity will take you a step further in the planning process by developing actual ways you might maintain connections for youth who will be presented to you in several case scenarios.

Planning for Successful Connections

Small Group Exercise

Directions

- ✓ Define integration.
 - Everyone in this room has done integration work. Integration simply means that we plan and incorporate our past and present relationships successfully into our lives. For example, when you get married, you must incorporate your spouse's family into your life, or when you have a child, you must incorporate that child and meeting its needs into your life without neglecting your other relationships.
- ✓ Discuss the need for integration work to be done to assist youth in successfully transitioning to an adoptive family or other permanent family resource while maintaining connections with birth family members or other significant attachment figures.
- ✓ Conduct Small Group Activity - Maintaining Connections for Youth.
- ✓ Through the use of various scenarios, you will plan ways to maintain connections for youth who might be placed in a family that allow the youth to maintain connections while also promoting attachment to the adoptive/permanent family.

Instructions for Small Group Activity

- ✓ Have participants return to the small groups they were in for the previous activity.
- ✓ Assign each group a case scenario.
- ✓ Remind them that they will need a reporter/recorder.
- ✓ Tell them to discuss the following specific areas with regard to maintaining connections for their assigned youth: (*you may want to post these on a flip chart*)



- Ways to maintain the connections
 - Setting boundaries among all parties involved that will avoid potential problems in the relationship
 - Negotiating the actual plan for connections and re-negotiating should the need arise
- ✓ Give them twelve minutes to complete the activity.
 - ✓ Come back together as a large group and have each group report. They should read their case scenario and then report on their ideas. *(If you are running short of time, you could have subsequent groups after the first one report only on any different ideas that they came up with in their group.)*
 - ✓ You may want to record their ideas on a flip chart under the different categories identified.
 - ✓ Ask if anyone from the other groups has any additional ideas.
 - ✓ Again, be sure to thank the reporter/recorder and acknowledge the work of the group.



Trainer's Comments

- The more thought and planning you can put into the ongoing connections the youth you are parenting will be maintaining, the more successful you will be.
- By taking the initiative to develop a relationship with the youth's connections and working together on a plan for maintaining the connection, you are taking charge of the situation and affirming your support of the youth.
- As you saw in your small group work, each situation is different and the plan for maintaining connections will be different. Don't be locked into thinking that there is only one way to successfully maintain connections.
- Be creative in your thinking and planning regarding your youth's connections.

Module 6: Where Do We Go From Here?

Directions

- ✓ Summary of the session - Allow the participants to summarize the session by asking all of them to give one new skill or insight that they are taking with them from the meeting that will help them be more successful in maintaining connections for the youth they are parenting or will parent.
- ✓ Preface the review of the power point slide “Where Do We Go from Here?” by stressing that they need to talk to their child/youth and the social worker about the child/youth’s ongoing connections. To complete the task of establishing ongoing connections they should:
- ✓ Review the slide: **Where Do We Go from Here?**
 - Identify the ongoing connections to be maintained.
 - Meet with all the parties involved to formulate a plan for how the connections will be maintained.
 - Once the plan is finalized, complete the agreement for ongoing connections, review it with all parties, and have each sign it.
 - Make sure everyone involved has a copy of the agreement.
 - Periodically review the ongoing connections and renegotiate the plan when necessary.
- ✓ Review participants’ list of “wants” from the beginning of the meeting. Make sure they have been addressed and if not, discuss ways they can meet the need.
- ✓ Allow participants to ask any remaining questions or make any closing comments.
- ✓ Give them a copy of the Participant’s Handbook.
- ✓ Discuss what will occur now with regard to their work with the agency and with youth needing permanence.
- ✓ Thank them for their participation and insight.
- ✓ Evaluation form
- ✓ End the meeting.



Time:
15 minutes



Trainer's Comments

- Acknowledge your enjoyment of working with the participants and the hard work they have put into the meeting.
- Emphasize your confidence in their ability to effectively parent youth who will be maintaining ongoing connections.
- Remind them that, if you or they have concerns regarding maintaining ongoing connections, you or their social worker will meet with them individually.
- Explain that the Participant's Handbook has the article on open adoption that you discussed earlier in the meeting as well as some tools they or the social worker may use in planning for ongoing connections.
- Thank them and end the meeting.

Handout 1A

Case Scenario 1: Ashley

Ashley's birth mother has a substance abuse issue and because of it she neglected her children, which resulted in their removal. Ashley, age 15, has, in the three years she has been in foster care, continued to have some contact with her birth mom. Ashley loves her birth mother and hopes that she will get help for her drug problem. However, Ashley is also realistic and says that she does not think her mom will give up drugs anytime soon.

Ashley's birth mother has told the social worker that she wants Ashley to have a stable life and wants to help her in any way she can. The birth mother calls the agency regularly to ask about her daughter, but she is still abusing drugs. You have been asked to allow Ashley some contact with her birth mother. Ashley was initially placed with you as a foster child and has been with you for almost two years. You want to adopt Ashley. Ashley says she will consider it if she can still stay in contact with her birth mother.

1. What are some ways that connections between Ashley and her birth mother could be maintained?
2. What boundaries would you need to set to avoid problems in maintaining the connection?
3. How would you negotiate the actual plan for maintaining connections?
4. If problems should arise, how would/should the plan be renegotiated?

Handout 1B

Case Scenario 2: Annette

Annette, a 16-year-old youth, comes from a family where violence was an everyday occurrence. Annette and her siblings were removed due to physical abuse on the part of the birth father. Because no home was available to take all the children, Annette was placed in a different foster home from her younger siblings. The foster parents of her brother and sister are in the process of adopting them. The younger children have no contact with either of their birth parents.

Annette is adamant that she does not want any contact with the birth father. She does want to see her birth mother, who is still with the birth father. Part of Annette's desire to see her birth mother is, in the social worker's opinion, based on the fact that Annette worries that her birth mother is being abused. As Annette's foster family you are open to adopting her. Your family and the family of Annette's siblings are willing to permit the children to maintain contact. You fear that by allowing Annette to have contact with the birth mother, you will increase the likelihood that the birth father will find out where the children are placed and he will show up at the door and cause problems for the children and for both your family and the family of Annette's siblings.

1. What are some ways that connections between Annette and her birth mother could be maintained?
2. What boundaries would you need to set to avoid problems in maintaining the connection and keeping your family "safe" from the birth father?
3. How would you negotiate the actual plan for maintaining connections?
4. If problems should arise, how would/should the plan be renegotiated?

Handout 1C

Case Scenario 3: Shavonda

A 14-year-old youth you have learned about, Shavonda, needs a permanent placement and you are open to providing an adoptive home for her. Shavonda's social worker has told you that she is very attached to her birth mother and maternal grandmother. Shavonda and her birth mother lived with the maternal grandmother due to the birth mother's mental health issues. As the grandmother's health failed, the birth mother was not able to provide care for her daughter and Shavonda entered foster care.

It has been determined that Shavonda cannot return to her birth family due to her mother's mental illness and the grandmother's failing health. She continues to visit them and worries about both her birth mother and grandmother. Shavonda is hesitant to consider permanence because she thinks she can go back and take care of both her birth mother and grandmother when she is 18. Her loyalty and attachment to them are very strong. One of your fears is that, if Shavonda joins your family, she will have difficulty attaching to your family as long as she is allowed to continue to have contact with her birth mother and grandmother. On the other hand, you know that requiring her to give up these important connections will make it difficult for her to attach to your family. So, if you are going to adopt Shavonda, you must plan how to maintain these connections successfully.

1. What are some ways that connections between Shavonda, her birth mother, and grandmother could be maintained?
2. What boundaries would you need to set to avoid problems in maintaining the connection?
3. How would you negotiate the actual plan for maintaining connections?
4. If problems should arise, how would/should the plan be renegotiated?

Handout 1D

Case Scenario 4: Brandon

Brandon is a 16 year old who is in an independent living program. Brandon is currently placed in a group home. He has several significant people with whom he wants to stay connected: his brother, who is 24 and lives in the community near Brandon's group home; the birth mother, who is terminally ill and cannot care for Brandon; and a former foster family, who chose not to adopt Brandon but spends holidays with him, because he has nowhere else to go.

Because of these important connections, the social worker initially felt that a goal of independent living was the best plan for Brandon to allow him to maintain his connections. Brandon is an intelligent and thoughtful young man and has told the social worker that he would like to have a permanent family just as long as he can continue to see his brother, birth mother, and former foster family.

You met Brandon while doing volunteer work at the group home and your relationship just clicked. You have taken your entire family to the group home to meet Brandon and all of you feel that you are the right family for Brandon. While he already has the goal of independent living and all these people with whom he wants to maintain connections, the social worker is not opposed to you adopting him. You need to think about the plan for keeping Brandon connected to all the people who are important to him.

1. What are some ways that connections between Brandon, his brother, birth mother, and former foster family could be maintained?
2. What boundaries would you need to set to avoid problems in maintaining the connection?
3. How would you negotiate the actual plan for maintaining connections?
4. If problems should arise, how would/should the plan be renegotiated?

PARTICIPANT'S HANDBOOK

FOR ONGOING CONNECTIONS

PARENT PREPARATION GROUP



Openness in Adoption

Open, or fully disclosed, adoptions allow adoptive parents, and often the adopted child, to interact directly with birth parents. Open adoption falls at one end of an openness communication continuum that allows family members to interact in ways that feel most comfortable to them. In semi-open or mediated adoptions, information is relayed through a mediator (e.g., an agency caseworker or attorney) rather than through direct contact between the birth and adoptive families. In confidential adoptions, no identifying information is exchanged.



Confidential Adoption

Semi-Open/
Mediated Adoption

Fully Disclosed/
Open Adoption

What's Inside:

- Laws regarding open adoption
- Research findings
- Implications for agency policy
- Open adoption for children in foster care
- When openness is not in the child's best interest
- Unresolved issues
- For more information



U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
Administration for Children and Families
Administration on Children, Youth and Families
Children's Bureau



Child Welfare Information Gateway
Children's Bureau/ACYF
1250 Maryland Avenue, SW
Eighth Floor
Washington, DC 20024
703.385.7565 or 800.394.3366
Email: info@childwelfare.gov
www.childwelfare.gov

Family Connections Project - Chicago, IL

In open adoptions, communication may include letters, e-mails, telephone calls, or visits. The frequency of contact ranges from every few years to several times a month or more, depending on the needs and wishes of all involved. The goals of open adoption are:

- To minimize the child's loss of relationships.
- To maintain and celebrate the adopted child's connections with all the important people in his or her life.
- To allow children to resolve losses with truth, rather than with fantasy.

The recent movement toward open adoption has taken place in the context of larger social change. Birth parents are now empowered to make choices: there is less stigma in raising children alone and greater access to abortion and birth control. Also, the societal movement toward less secrecy and the prizing of diversity, including a variety of family structures, has allowed for a greater acceptance of open adoption.

Laws Regarding Open Adoption

Adoptions have taken place since the beginning of human history. However, until the early 1900s they were generally informal, community-based arrangements. Confidentiality gradually became an integral part of adoption to protect birth parents and adopted children from the stigma surrounding illegitimate births.

In 1851 the Commonwealth of Massachusetts set the legal precedent for severing the relationship between an adopted child and his or her biological parents. In 1917 Minnesota

passed the first State law barring public inspection of adoption records. By 1950, most States had passed legislation sealing adoption records, even from adoptees themselves.

In response to a groundswell of adult adopted persons and birth parents returning to agencies for more information and advocating legislative changes, some States have recently changed their adoption laws. These changes initially involved the creation of mutual consent registries. A mutual consent registry is a central repository where individuals directly involved in adoptions can indicate their willingness to disclose identifying information. Approximately 23 States have some form of mutual consent registry.

Some States also have changed their laws to acknowledge "cooperative adoption," or post-adoption agreements between birth and adoptive parents. These often include some degree of openness. While no State prohibits entering into these types of agreements, they are not legally enforceable in most States. Often they are informal "good faith" agreements between birth and adoptive parents that may or may not be in writing. Even in States where postadoption contracts are enforceable, no law allows for an adoption to be overturned if either birth or adoptive parents fail to follow through on their agreement. Many of the States have also enacted laws allowing an adopted adult to petition the court for access to his or her original birth certificate. These petitions are generally granted with "good cause." A few States have also enacted laws allowing an adopted adult (18 or older) unrestricted access to his or her original birth certificate or agency records. A few other States allow the birth parents to file a consent allowing the release of the birth certificate or a non-consent blocking its release.

For more information on laws relating to cooperative adoptions, access to adoption records, and mutual consent registries, see the legal section of the Child Welfare Information Gateway website (www.childwelfare.gov/systemwide/laws_policies/index.cfm).

Research Findings

Open adoption is a continuing source of controversy. Much of the debate, however, is based on philosophical differences rather than empirical research. In the past, research was difficult because most adoptions were confidential and, thus, “invisible.” Studying open adoptions continues to be a challenge, because no two adoptions are alike and relationships are constantly evolving. However, existing research does indicate the following:¹

Many fears regarding open adoption are based on myths.

- Parties in open (fully disclosed) adoptions are NOT confused about their parenting rights and responsibilities.
- Birth mothers do NOT attempt to “reclaim” their children.
- Children in open (fully disclosed) adoptions are NOT confused about who their parents are. They do understand the different roles of adoptive and birth parents in their lives.
- Differences in adolescent adoptive identity or degree of preoccupation with adoption

¹ Research findings are taken from the Minnesota Texas Adoption Research Project, the only longitudinal study to compare open adoption to other types of adoption. A list of publications and research findings from this longitudinal study can be found on the project’s website (<http://fsos.che.umn.edu/mtarp/default.html>).

are NOT related to the level of openness in the adoption.

- Adoptive openness does NOT appear to influence an adoptee’s self-esteem in any negative way.
- Adoptive parents in open adoptions do NOT feel less in control and, indeed, have a greater sense of permanence in their relationship with their child.
- Open adoption does NOT interfere with adoptive parents’ sense of entitlement or sense that they have the right to parent their adopted child.
- Birth mothers in open and ongoing mediated adoptions do NOT have more problems with grief resolution; indeed, they show better grief resolution than those in closed adoptions. *Researchers did find that birth mothers in time-limited mediated adoptions (where contact stopped) had more difficulty resolving grief at the first interview of the study (when the children were between 4 and 12 years old).*

The level of openness should be decided on a case-by-case basis. There is no one level of adoption openness that best fits all families. Each type of adoption has its own benefits and challenges that should be considered for each particular situation.

Adoption should be viewed as an ongoing process rather than a discrete event. Open adoption is based on relationships and, like all relationships, grows and changes over time. As birth and adoptive families grow and change, the need for communication changes as well. For example, older adopted children may have more questions about their birth family than they had as toddlers. Adoptive and birth parents need to be open to the needs of children as

they get older and gain a sense of ownership over the relationship they have with their birth families.

Factors associated with increased openness:

- The birth and adoptive parents' mutual concern for the child's well being.
- An emergence of friendship or a personally satisfying relationship between the birth and adoptive parents.
- Regular flow of communication between the birth and adoptive families.

Factors associated with decreased openness:

- Parties living far away from each other.
- Major differences in life situations, interests, or values.
- Relatives or friends who discourage contact.
- Change in a birth mother's situation such as marriage or the birth of another child.
- Inability to negotiate a mutually agreed upon comfort zone of contact.
- Adoptive parents feeling that contact is becoming stressful for the child.
- Inability of agency intermediaries to keep up contact to everyone's satisfaction.

Agency staff continue to play a critical role in fully disclosed adoptions. Since the early 1990s, the work of adoption agencies has changed dramatically. More birth mothers are requesting openness. Some adoption agencies have seen an increase in placements since they began offering openness options. In the case of open adoptions, birth mothers, rather than adoptive parents, are often viewed as the agency's primary client; the initial decision making

regarding openness rests in their hands. Agency staff play a critical role in counseling birth and adoptive parents who are contemplating and negotiating these open relationships.

Adoption caseworkers participating in the Minnesota/Texas Adoption Research Project (MTARP), whose agencies moved toward greater openness, reported positive experiences with this change. In order to be effective, professionals working in adoption need to be attuned not only to their own philosophy of adoption, but also to how to work effectively with clients whose personalities and relationship histories vary greatly.

Implications for Agency Policy

Research clearly indicates that no one level of adoption openness is best for everyone. A variety of options should be made available to families. Researchers recommend that agencies present the advantages and disadvantages of openness and help birth parents and adoptive families identify the degree of openness best for them.

The shift toward openness, especially mediated openness where the agency relays information between the birth and adoptive parents, increases the workload on agency staff in an era of shrinking resources and increased demand on social service providers. From a staffing perspective, fully disclosed adoptions may be less costly in the long run than mediated adoptions because there is no need to transfer the information between parties. There will continue to be a

need, however, for postadoption counseling in these adoptions.

Open Adoption for Children in Foster Care

Children in foster care whose goal is adoption are likely to achieve better outcomes by maintaining their existing connections with extended birth family members, siblings, and other adults with whom they have significant attachments.

Systematic research, however, has not been conducted on open adoption of children from foster care. According to *the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS) Report #7* (www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/stats_research/afcars/tar/report7.htm), published in August 2002, 82 percent of the children adopted from foster care in fiscal year 2000 were adopted by either their former foster parents (61 percent) or a relative (21 percent). These adoptions are often open either because of a relationship developed between the birth and adoptive parents when the children were in care, or because the children know their birth families, know their addresses and phone numbers, and may contact them whether or not the adoption was intended to be open. Greater use of concurrent planning² and dual licensure³ has contributed to increased numbers of adoptions by foster parents throughout the country and may increase this type of open adoption as well.

² Simultaneously identifying another permanency goal for a child (besides reunification) and documenting efforts so permanency can be achieved quickly for a child should reunification efforts not succeed.

³ Licensure resource families as both foster and adoptive parents. (Some State laws allow for dual licensure or certification. Check your State law to see if dual licensure or certification is practiced in your State).

When Openness Is Not in the Child's Best Interest

In some cases, including the child in a relationship with the birth parents may not be in his or her best interest. This may be true if:

- A birth parent is unable to maintain appropriate relationship boundaries with a child due to mental or emotional illness.
- There has been so much violence directed at a child that any contact with that parent would only result in more trauma for the child.

Even when it is not safe for the child to maintain an open relationship with a birth parent, an extended family member may be able to provide a link to the child's past without causing additional trauma. Confer with an adoption-competent mental health provider, talk to the adoptive family, and use the accompanying pro and con tables for additional assistance in making difficult choices regarding the amount of openness to include in a child's adoption.

Unresolved Issues

The professional adoption community has not yet resolved certain aspects of openness in adoption. State laws and agencies have dealt with these issues in a variety of ways depending on their philosophies and experience. Systematic research has not been conducted or is inconclusive regarding the following issues:

- What is the ongoing impact of open adoption on older children who remember their birth families?
- Is it ethical to use promises of ongoing future contact with their children as an incentive for birth parents to relinquish parental rights?
- Are cooperative adoption agreements legally enforceable?
- What is the definition of “the best interests of the child” in cooperative adoption agreements?
- How should cooperative adoption agreements be modified if parties request a change?
- How are open adoption arrangements working in independent adoptions, where they are negotiated without the involvement of agency personnel?
- How do adopted persons develop identity in open adoptions in a variety of social contexts? (MTARP examined a fairly homogeneous sample of middle class adopters of children from the United States. How might results differ with different ethnic groups or children adopted internationally?)
- **Child Welfare League of America** (www.cwla.org/programs/adoption/cwla_standards.htm)
CWLA's *Standards of Excellence for Adoption Services* provides best practice regarding openness in adoption.
- **Evan B. Donaldson Institute** (www.adoptioninstitute.org/policy/polopen1.html)
Provides outcomes of studies on openness in adoption from 1986 to 1999, research on attitudes toward and trends in postadoption contact, and literature reviews and criticism.
- **Insight: Open Adoption Resources and Support** (www.openadoptioninsight.org/)
Offers resources for professionals, adoptive parents, and birth parents considering open adoption.
- **Minnesota/Texas Adoption Research Project** (<http://fsos.che.umn.edu/mtarp/default.html>).
Provides information on a longitudinal study of openness in adoption since 1985. The most recent wave included a total of 720 individuals: both parents in 190 adoptive families, at least one adopted child in 171 of the families, and 169 birth mothers.
- **Postadoption Contact Agreements Between Birth and Adoptive Families** (www.childwelfare.gov/systemwide/laws_policies/statutes/cooperative.cfm)
Provides adoption statutes for each State, compiled by Child Welfare Information Gateway.

For More Information

Useful Web Sites

- **American Association of Open Adoption Agencies** (www.openadoption.org/)
Helps families find agencies practicing open adoption. Adoptees on their mailing list respond to the question, “What do you wish your adoptive parents had known?”

Useful Books and Articles for Families

Abstracts of these books are available on the Child Welfare Information Gateway database: <http://basis.caliber.com/cwig/ws/chdocs/docs/gateway/SearchForm>

- ***Children of Open Adoption*** by Patricia Martinez Dorner and Kathleen Silber (1997, Independent Adoption Press). The topics in this book include adoption understanding, developing relationships, families with open and closed adoptions, bonding, communication, and sibling issues.
- **“The Effects of Open Adoption on Biological and Adoptive Parents and Children: The Arguments and the Evidence”** by M. Berry in *Child Welfare*, 70 (5), 637-651, 1991.
- ***How to Open an Adoption*** by Patricia Martinez Dorner (1998, R-Squared Press). A book for adoptive parents, birth parents, and adoption professionals on how to open the lines of communication and navigate more inclusive relationships.
- ***Lifegivers: Framing the Birth Parent Experience in Open Adoption*** by James L. Gritter (2000, CWLA Press). This book examines the ways birth parents are marginalized. The author makes the point that adopted children are best served when birth parents and adoptive parents work together to ensure that birth parents remain in children’s lives.
- ***The Open Adoption Experience*** by Lois Ruskai Melina and Sharon Kaplan Roszia (1993, HarperPerennial). This complete guide for adoptive and birth families touches on almost every aspect of an open adoption.
- ***The Spirit of Open Adoption*** by Jim Gritter (1997, CWLA Press). This book takes a realistic look at the joys and pains of open adoption for birth parents, adoptees, and adoptive parents.

- ***What is Open Adoption?*** by Brenda Romanchik (1999, R-Squared Press). Written from the perspective of a birth mother in an open adoption, this pocket guide provides concise information and resources.

Useful Books and Articles for Professionals

- **“Adopted Adolescents’ Preoccupation With Adoption: The Impact on Adoptive Family Relationships”** by Julie K. Kohler, Harold D. Grotevant, and Ruth G. McRoy in *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 64 (February 2002) pp. 93- 104.
- ***Adoptive Families: Longitudinal Outcomes for Adolescents: Final Report to the William T. Grant Foundation*** by Harold D. Grotevant (for grant # 95171495, April 30, 2001). (Available on the MTARP website: <http://fsos.che.umn.edu/mtarp/default.html>.)
- **“Changing Agency Practices Toward Openness in Adoption”** by Susan M. Henney, Steven Onken, Ruth McRoy, and Harold D. Grotevant in *Adoption Quarterly*, Vol. 1 #3, 1998.
- **“The Effects of Open Adoption on Biological and Adoptive Parents and Children: The Arguments and the Evidence”** by M. Berry in *Child Welfare*, 70 (5), 637-651, 1991.
- **“Enforceable Post-Adoption Contact Statutes, Part I: Adoption With Contact”** by Annette Appell (2000, Haworth Press), *Adoption Quarterly*, Vol. 4 #1, 2000.
- **“Foster Care and Adoption: A Look at Open Adoption”** by Amy L. Doherty (1997) in *Journal of Contemporary Legal Issues*, (University of San Diego Law School, 2000).

- **“Openness: A Critical Component of Special Needs Adoption”** by Deborah N. Silverstein and Sharon Kaplan Roszia in *Child Welfare*, Vol. 78, #5, September/October, 1999.
- **“Openness in Adoption and the Level of Child Participation”** by G. Wrobel, S. Ayers-Lopez, H. D. Grotevant, R.G McRoy, and M. Friedrich, in *Child Development*, 67, pp. 2358-2374, 1996.
- ***Openness in Adoption: Exploring Family Connections*** by Harold D. Grotevant and Ruth McRoy (Sage Publications, 1998). Provides a summary of the Time 1 findings from the Minnesota/Texas Adoption Research Project when the adoptees were 4 to 12 years old. (Can be ordered through the MTARP website: <http://fsos.che.umn.edu/mtarp/default.html>.)
- **“What Works in Open Adoption”** by Harold D. Grotevant in *What Works in Child Welfare*, Edited by Miriam P. Kluger, G. Alexander and P. Curtis (CWLA Press, Washington, DC, 2000). Succinct summary of research on open adoption and a table outlining various studies on openness. (Can be ordered through the CWLA: www.cwla.org/pubs/.)

PROS of Each Type of Adoption for the Involved Parties

	CONFIDENTIAL ADOPTIONS	MEDIATED (SEMI-OPEN)	OPEN ADOPTIONS
Birth Parents	<p>No contact between birth and adoptive families. No identifying information is provided.</p> <p>Only nonidentifying information (e.g., height, hair color, medical history, etc.) is provided through a third party (e.g., agency or attorney).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provides real choice for birth parents when compared to open adoption. Privacy. Some feel this provides a sense of closure and ability to move on with life. 	<p>Nonidentifying contact is made (via cards, letters, pictures) through a third party (e.g., agency or attorney).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Allows for some information transfer between birth and adoptive parents (and perhaps the child). Some privacy. 	<p>Direct interaction between birth and adoptive families. Identities are known.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increased ability to deal with grief and loss. Comfort in knowing child's well-being. Sense of control over decision-making in placement. Potential for more fully defined role in child's life. Potential to develop a healthy relationship with the child as he or she grows. Less pain and guilt about the decision. May make the decision to place for adoption easier (compared to a contested termination of parental rights trial).
Adoptive Parents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No need to physically share the child with birth parents. No danger of birth parent interference or co-parenting. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Greater sense of control over process. Roles may be more clearly defined than in either confidential or open options. Increased sense of entitlement compared to confidential adoptions. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increased sense of having the "right" to parent and increased ability for confident parenting. Potential for authentic relationship with the birth family. More understanding of children's history. Increased empathy for birth parents. Less fear of birth parents reclaiming child because they know the parent and their wishes. Delight of being "chosen" as a parent.
Adopted Persons	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Protection from unstable or emotionally disturbed birth parents. 	<p style="text-align: center;">Only true when relationship is "shared" with the adopted child</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Genetic and birth history known. Birthparents are "real" not "fantasy." Positive adjustment is promoted in adoptee. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Direct access to birth parents and history. Need to search is eliminated. Identity questions are answered (Who do I look like? Why was I placed?). Eases feelings of abandonment. Lessening of fantasies: birth parents are "real." Increased circle of supportive adults. Increased attachment to adoptive family (especially if the birth parents support the placement). Preservation of connections (e.g., with siblings, relatives). Lessens loyalty conflicts (according to recent research). Exposure to racial and ethnic heritage. Ability for evolving, dynamic, and developmentally appropriate account of the adoption.

CONS of Each Type of Adoption for the Involved Parties

	CONFIDENTIAL ADOPTIONS	MEDIATED (SEMI-OPEN)	OPEN ADOPTIONS
Birth Parents	<p>No contact between birth and adoptive families. No identifying information is provided.</p> <p>Only nonidentifying information (e.g., height, hair color, medical history, etc.) is provided through a third party (e.g., agency or attorney).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Less grief resolution due to lack of information about the child's well-being. • May encourage denial of fact that child was born and placed with another family. 	<p>Nonidentifying contact is made (via cards, letters, pictures) through a third party (e.g., agency or attorney).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Loss of potential for direct relationship with adoptive family (and/or child). • Increased grief in the initial years, less later. • Loss of contact if intermediary changes or leaves (i.e., staff turnover, policy changes, or agency closings). • Birth mother may feel obligated to place child due to the emotional or financial support given by the prospective adoptive parents. 	<p>Direct interaction between birth and adoptive families. Identities are known.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Full responsibility for setting relationship limits and boundaries. • Potential abuse of trust (fewer safeguards). • Potential disappointment if adoptive family cannot meet all expectations or needs. • Birth mother may feel obligated to place child due to the emotional or financial support given by the prospective adoptive parents.
Adoptive Parents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Allows for denial of "adopted family" or fertility status. • Increased fear, less empathy for birth parents. • No access to additional medical information about birth family. • Less control: agency controls information. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Loss of the full relationship with the birth parents. • Lack of ability to have questions answered immediately. • Potentially troubling cards, letters, or pictures. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Full responsibility for setting relationship limits and boundaries. • Potential pressure: accept openness or no child. • Potential difficulty with emotionally disturbed birth parents. • Potential for supporting both child and birth parents (emotionally).
Adopted Persons	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Possible adolescent identity confusion (unable to compare physical and emotional traits to their birth families). • Limited access to information that others take for granted. • Potential preoccupation with adoption issues. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Similar to confidential adoptions, if information not shared with the adoptee. • Potential perception that it is unsafe to interact with birth family directly. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No clean break for assimilation into family, which some feel is necessary. • Potential feelings of rejection if contact stops. • Difficulty explaining the relationship to peers. • Potential for playing families against each other.

NEGOTIATING AND CLARIFYING AN AGREEMENT TO MAINTAIN ONGOING CONNECTIONS

A simple and effective way to negotiate and clarify an agreement to maintain ongoing connections between a youth and birth family members or other significant attachment figures is to use the *Steps of Social Contracting*.

(Anyone can negotiate a social contract. The social worker or other professional will probably do this for you, however, if they do not you may do this yourself. As you move through the steps, remember that you cannot negotiate with someone who is not in the room. Therefore, all parties involved need to be present or you need to have this discussion as many times as necessary to involve everyone.)

The steps and examples of how you can use them in reaching an agreement on ongoing connections are:

- Acknowledge personal feelings

As you begin the discussion, the first step is to acknowledge your personal feelings. By beginning in this way, you affirm that everyone involved is going to be feeling something different and also there are no right or wrong feelings; your feelings, no matter what they are, are always right. So you might begin the conversation with a statement such as "I am excited that we are able to get together to talk about how we are going to maintain connections for you and Sally. I also am a bit apprehensive about the task because we need to arrive at an agreement that will be satisfactory to all of us."

- State the problem (task or challenge)

"The task we have before us is to plan for future contact between you and Sally. As you know we are in the process of adopting Sally. We know that you are a very important part of her life, and she would like to remain connected to you in some way. We have to figure out what that ongoing connection will be."

- Reach agreement on the problem (task or challenge)

It is important that everyone agree on the task. After you have stated the task, you need to ask the other participants in the conversation: "Do you see the task in the same way that I do?" They may or may not agree with you. If there is a difference in the way they see the task then you must restate the task until everyone can reach an agreement on what it is.

- Elicit wants of others

Begin by asking the other parties involved what they want with regard to ongoing connections. "Let's start with Sally. Sally, I know you want to remain connected to your

birth mother. Can you tell me what that connection would look like to you? How do you want to stay connected?" Let Sally give you her ideas on what sort of contact she wants. Then ask the same of the birth mother and allow her to respond.

- *State your wants (Negotiation around wants and offers can be combined by you clearly stating, as they state their wants, what you can offer and you asking them if they can offer what you want as you state yours.)*

The next step is to state your wants. "I also want you to stay connected. As a part of that, I want Sally to feel secure that her adoption will not be jeopardized and that she will not be asked to choose between us as her adoptive family and her birth mother. I want to feel that Sally will be open to being a permanent part of our family."

You will, as a part of this discussion, reach agreement on what all parties can offer with regard to the stated wants. It is important to be very clear in stating what the offers are.

For example, "Sally you said you want to be able to call your birth mother regularly and visit with her occasionally, however, you do not want your birth father to know where you are. Janice, (birth mother) you said that is also what you want. I am willing to allow that level of contact if you, Janice, can offer to keep Sally safe from the birth father knowing where she is. Is this something you can do, and if so, how?" Allow Janice to state what she will offer with regard to safety issues. Continue the discussion by reaching an agreement on how contacts will occur. Again, you need to be very specific.

- *Reach agreement on offers*

After all parties have stated their wants and offers, you should restate them and reach agreement on what they are: "OK, let me see if we are all in agreement on how this plan would work. Sally and Janice, you have agreed that you would like to talk to each other at least a couple of times a month by phone. Janice, you said that you will make yourself available at a specific time for Sally's calls; we said that Sally would call you on the first and third Thursday of each month at 4 p.m. Sally will call you either from the social worker's office, a neutral location, or a cell phone, not from our home, so that your husband (the birth father) cannot locate us. Is that correct?"

Make sure both agree on what was the agreement. Then move on to the visitation part: "You both also want to have occasional visits. At this point you agreed that a visit every three months would be acceptable to you. You both said you would feel more comfortable visiting in the social worker's office or a neutral location. I had previously talked with the social worker and he is willing to allow visits there. We have agreed that the visits will be on the second Monday of March, June, September, and December at 3:30 p.m. and will last for an hour and a half, until 5 p.m. when the office closes. Am I correct in what we have agreed upon?"

- Elicit feedback on control and vulnerability

Basically, this step is to take care of the “what ifs” that always pop into everyone’s head. So you might ask, “If we do everything we agreed on. Is there anything that could go wrong?” There will usually be some items, such as:

“What if I am sick?”

“What if you have to be out of the office?”

“What if Janice’s husband finds out about the visit at the social worker’s office or the selected location?”

- Renegotiate wants and offers, if needed

It is important to deal with all the “what ifs” and come up with a contingency plan by renegotiating wants and offers around those items. The discussion might resemble:

“If any one of us is sick, then we should call the others as soon as possible to reschedule. Whoever is changing the plan must take responsibility for notifying everyone else involved, including the social worker.”

“If Janice’s husband should find out, she will call me and the social worker at once, and we will make a plan to reschedule the visit at a safe time and place. I will let Sally know about the change in plans.”

- Restate the agreement

After you have renegotiated based on the problems that might occur, you should clearly and specifically restate the agreement you have reached, including the contingency plan for those issues that might come up. To make sure everyone clearly understands, it is a good idea to put the agreement in writing and give a copy to all parties involved. The form below is an example of a written agreement regarding ongoing connections that the social worker for a youth may use. There is nothing legally binding about such an agreement, it is simply a tool to use to make sure everyone understands the agreement and cannot say they heard something different, which often happens when we only reach a verbal agreement.

ONGOING CONNECTIONS AGREEMENT

We, the undersigned, have reached the following agreement regarding ongoing connections between (name of youth) and (name of birth family member or other attachment figure).

The connection between these parties will be maintained by the following plan:

State clearly each agreed upon contact. Be specific about each contact: how and when it will occur, who is responsible for any changes or rescheduling and how the other parties will be informed (i.e., Sally and Janice will have regularly scheduled telephone calls on the first and third Thursday of each month at 4 p.m. Sally will come to the agency to make the call or call from a neutral location. She will let the social worker know by the Monday preceding the call if she is coming to the agency to make the telephone call.)

We have participated in developing this plan and agree to honor this agreement. If there is a need to renegotiate the contacts, we will inform the social worker and revise the plan. At this time, we accept the plan as stated above.

(Youth's Signature)

(Birth Family Member/Attachment Figure Signature)

(Social Worker's Signature)

(Adoptive/Permanent Parent Signature)

ONGOING CONNECTIONS EVALUATION PARENT PREPARATION

Please complete the following questions to help us evaluate this training. Your input will assist us in assuring that the training is effective for other parent groups.

1. What components of the training did you find most helpful?
2. Are there components that you would recommend changing? —Yes — No
If yes, what are they and what changes would you recommend?
3. How will this training assist you in working with your youth to maintain ongoing connections?
4. What new skills or knowledge are you taking from this training?
5. What skills or knowledge do you need that were not covered in this training?
6. Please rate the overall effectiveness of this training to your role as an adoptive/permanent parent for a youth from the foster care system.

Not Effective Very Effective

——1 ——2 ——3 ——4 ——5 ——6

Please provide your name and number, if you would be willing to have an evaluator phone you to discuss your reactions and ideas about this training,

NAME: _____

PHONE NUMBER: _____

BEST TIME TO CALL: _____