

ENTITLEMENT VS OWNERSHIP OF THE ADOPTED CHILD-- WHY OPEN ADOPTION ISN'T ENOUGH

By Ellen Roseman-Curtis
Cooperative Adoption Consulting

Currently in both independent and agency adoptions, adoptive parents and birthparents are coming together with much openness. In the 1980's, both the American Adoption Congress and the Child Welfare League of America passed resolutions recommending open adoption as standard practice.

Is having initial openness along with a comprehensive health history enough? Is it enough to have pictures and letters for the child from the birth family? Does openness solve most problems for the child concerning roots? Do ongoing visitation and contact with birth family help?

Open adoption is important. It can provide a sense of roots and continuity not seen in confidential placements. Without secrecy, feelings of shame and inadequacy begin to dissolve. But, beyond open placement every family choosing to adopt must consciously know and work with the issue of "entitlement." No, openness isn't enough.

ENTITLEMENT

In her book Raising Adopted Children, author Lois Melina states: Developing a sense that a child "belongs" in the family, even though he/she

wasn't born into it, is a crucial test for adoptive parents. Unless parents develop a sense that the child is really theirs, they will have difficulty accepting that the child is really theirs. They will have diffi-



culty accepting their right to act as parents.

She further says that a follow-up study by Benson Jaffee and David Fanshel suggests "that the amount of entitlement parents feel can be determined by looking at the extent to which they take risks with their children, deal with separation, handle discipline and discuss adoption with their child and others."

INFERTILITY ISSUES

When working with a prospective adoptive couple or single, the issue of infertility resolution should be considered. Even preferential adoptors need

to do work in this area. Questions to ask are:

- What has been done regarding the grief process when not able to give birth?
- Has the family or . . . individual been in a support group such as Resolve or have they had individual counseling?
- Are they in denial thinking this longed for "magical child" will fill the void?
- Are they angry, even furious because of this?
- Can they describe the grieving process, healing and letting go?
- Generally if they can't describe it, they haven't done it.

We know when there is a loss in our lives, there is no such thing as "complete resolution." There are times when sadness and grief will reappear and recycle. Those who have done the majority of this work will not become stuck feeling undeserving, victimized, cheated or angry.

CLAIMING BEHAVIOR

Claiming behavior precedes entitlement. In several ways, it is important that the family feel

it has a right to the child. The family will want to have a strong self-concept and a commitment to the adoptive relationship. As would be expected, parents who have a solid base of self-esteem are better able to show claiming behavior.

It is helpful to experience a psychological pregnancy with ritual. After grieving pregnancy loss and having closure in this area, the adopting couple or single can begin preparing the home for the arrival of the child. A full nursery can be readied and enjoyed prior to the child's arrival. Because rituals provide a way for people to express their feelings and because they signify change, these are signs that change will take place. In the past, children of adoption have sometimes arrived on short notice. Perhaps out of fear or superstition, pregnancy rituals have been little acknowledged.

Another sign that change is coming is by having a baby shower attended by family and friends. A shower is a way to share some of the feelings of uncertainty while talking about hope and dreams for the future. While some pre-adoptive families will feel uncomfortable doing all of this prior to the arrival of a baby, I am told consistently by my clients that they have no regrets about preparing a nursery and having a shower prior to the baby's arrival. It helps with the transition in thinking of themselves as parents-to-be.

MORE RITUALS

Rituals following the arrival of a child will aid entitlement. A common traditional ritual is a christening ceremony. In open adoption, an entrustment ceremony where the baby is formally presented to the adoptive parents is another building block in feeling entitled. It is a way to acknowledge feelings of shared joy and sadness, loss and gain, and change. . .

Rituals provide a meaningful bridge out of secrecy and shame which have been prevalent in traditional adoption. Children learn more from what we feel than what we say. Rituals celebrated with openness, love and pride send a strong message of validation to those around us and, most importantly, to the infant or child. As frosting enhances a cake, so rituals optimize entitlement.

Entitlement is maximized when the family can have fun and be silly. Anyone still mired in infertility grief will be unable to be light-hearted and enjoy the child. As the "memory makers" for our children, we provide the rituals, traditions and values we think important. Light-hearted times will vary according to one's own parenting style and need not be expensive nor elaborate. Children learn best in an atmosphere which is relaxed and fun. When we can play, laugh and spread out joy to our children and others, entitlement thrives.

It is said that laughter is the mainspring of the soul. Parenting is supposed to be fun!

ONGOING PROCESS OVER TIME

Entitlement does not occur as a single event. It is built over time through many developmental stages. Entitlement translates into self-confidence in one's parenting style. The focus is child-centered where we are sensitive to the child's needs and feelings. Secure, self-confident parents are able to solidly bond and attach to their child. Adoption issues or fears regarding the birth family are dealt with and are not ignored.

Ownership of the child is not seen in a family with well developed entitlement. It is seen in the family who is highly fearful, controlling and generally focused on their own needs rather than those of the child. In this kind of situation with little emotional safety provided, the child so learns from cues to shut down and ask few questions. As with a pressure cooker, the contents remain locked inside while building momentum. . .awaiting release at a much later time.

Parents who are secure transmit that security to the child who can then reciprocate in the attachment cycle. Feelings go full circle in a home atmosphere which is nurturing and safe emotionally. It is important to remember that bonding

is a slow unfolding process which takes time. Just as it takes time to come to terms about your fantasies about the child, so it takes time to grow together.

The bonding cycle can be hindered if a child does not respond well to us. It can also be affected if the child has a different temperament and personality style than that of the adoptive family. It can be difficult to parent a child who is physically unattractive to us. Good entitlement, along with awareness and knowledge, consciousness, support and resources will help the parents at a difficult juncture.

VISITATION

Children in open situations with birth family contact are not confused. Without exception, professionals and adoptive families are reporting more positives than not in these situations. Without shame or secrecy, the adopted person is able to move through developmental stages without becoming stuck. The openness adds "concrete pieces." The birth family is a reality, not a fantasy. The child going into puberty in an open placement can directly call and ask the birthparent about his or her own experience. (My daughter did this after wondering why she was developing so early. Her birthmother was able to share information which was not on the original health history form.) With birthparent fantasy a reality, the child can be freer emotionally. Yes, the

child will still go through stages of grief from time to time. With increased cognition, the reality of the loss will be understood and felt. But, the answers will be available directly. Parents who have done processing around their adoption fears are able to send verbal and body language messages which match when questions arise. Once again, we see that this optimizes the child's attachment to the adoptive family.

SUMMARY

Entitlement can best be achieved after emotional reactions to infertility have been identified and processed. As a key dynamic in the open or closed adoption process it strengthens all family ties. Entitlement requires consciousness and awareness on the part of the adoptive parents. Developing a sense of entitlement is ongoing and takes time.

Rituals are a vital part of entitlement helping the family move away from secrecy and shame. Pre-adoption rituals, post adoption family rituals which are complex and those which are simple contribute to family integration. Rituals acknowledge feelings, define relationships and mark transitions in our lives. Rituals strengthen feelings of entitlement.

Entitlement to parent means that we feel whole in our parenting. Whole parents are confident when disciplining. Discipline is neither too harsh

nor too light. Parents in the entitlement mode versus the ownership mode are able to provide an atmosphere which feels emotionally safe and respectful. The adopted child senses that questions about adoption may be comfortably asked and issues may be explored.

A strong sense of entitlement is a basic building block in the bonding/attachment cycle with the child. A child feeling that parents are relaxed, safe, confident and whole can grow and blossom in this kind of nurturing environment. Well-attached children have strong conscience development. Safety is the basic building block in the family atmosphere from which entitlement comes forth. Self-esteem then follows as part of this process.

Open adoption is the concrete piece which further assists the family in this journey towards becoming confident and whole. Added contact with the birth family in a relaxed accepting atmosphere benefits not only the adoptive family, but also the child and the birth family. Everyone wins!

Ellen Roseman-Curtis is Director of "Cooperative Adoption Consulting" located in San Anselmo, CA. The service is international focusing on education and openness in both agency and independent placements. Ellen lives near San Francisco with her three daughters who came to her through birth and adoption. Audio tape on Entitlement can be purchased through Cooperative Adoption Consulting, 54 Wellington Ave., San Anselmo, CA 94960.