

The Other Mother

A birthmom and an adoptive mom delve into the complex—and surprising—realities of their open adoptions.

For most of the last century, adoptions took place secretly. Attitudes began to change in the 1960s, and today, it's commonplace for birthparents, adoptive parents, and children to meet at the time of adoption and exchange letters or phone calls over the years, often through an intermediary. Although truly open adoptions are still somewhat unusual, the trend toward ongoing relationships among children, their birth families, and their adoptive families is growing. Here, birthmother Jennifer Davidson and adoptive mother Jana Wolff, each a part of a different open adoption, explore the open-adoption experience from both sides of the mothering equation.

How open is your adoption?

Jen (mother of Colin, age 6): I met Renée and Michael when I was almost three months pregnant. We let our relationship develop naturally, like any other, with regular phone calls, evenings out together, trips to the park, doctor visits. We felt like family by the time Colin was born. Today we are about as open as we can be.

Jana (mother of Ari, age 13): My husband and I met Ari's birthmother, Martie, when she was six months pregnant, and got to know her and her family in the weeks leading up to our son's birth. We had no formal arrangement about subsequent contact; we've just felt our way along. In the beginning we were frequently in touch; then less so as Martie got busier with her life. Now that she is parenting two children, we're again in frequent contact. Although we live far apart, we've managed several visits, and stay in touch through pictures, notes, and phone calls. Our son exchanges e-mail with a birth cousin close to his age.

Were you ever jealous of your child's other mother?

Jen: Yes, of course, there were moments when I felt jealous of Renée. But, more surprisingly, I was jealous of other people in Colin's life whom I didn't know—his babysitters, the guardians his parents had selected for him, neighbors. I wasn't prepared for a world in which strangers had such access to him. I wanted to scream at these people to stay away from my baby.

Jana: On one level, it seems crazy to be jealous of Ari's birthmother, given that I'm the lucky one who gets to parent Ari, the one who knows him better than anyone, the one he comes to for help and hugs. Having said that, I can tell you there are times I'm envious of my son's connection with his birthmother, a connection that predates mine and is incontrovertible. His connection with his birthmother will never be doubted, whereas my relationship with him, as his mom, is open to constant evaluation.

On a visit to his birthmother when he was 10, Ari asked if he could spend the night with her and his half-siblings. That was hard for me. I wasn't worried about losing him; I was worried about the piece of him I knew he'd leave behind. Would he ever feel like mine again? Would he feel torn saying good-bye to them? The answers: yes and yes.

Ari keeps a framed photo of himself with Martie and his siblings on the night table next to his bed. The insecure part of me notices that he doesn't have one of our family nearby, but the mature part of me understands that Ari is sure enough about the connection with his mom and dad to take us for granted.

What do you wish you could ask your child's other mother?

Jen: Two questions live in dusty corners at the back of my mind. I don't need them answered, but they reveal insecurities that I rarely share.

(1) Did Renée and I live too close for comfort? Did moving 1,000 miles away give her a sense of peace as Colin's only mother?

(2) Now that I am married and have a daughter, does she see me as a conscientious, involved, and stable parent? And would she now consider me as Colin's guardian should the unthinkable happen. And if not, why?

Jana: I've wanted to ask Martie why she never used contraception. I've wanted to ask how she now feels about the guy who ran off when he learned of her pregnancy. I've wanted to know what messages she sent her fetus. I've wanted to ask if she's had regrets (knowing a "yes" would be hard to hear). And, finally, I've wanted to know what it's like to hear her firstborn call me "Mom."

How different might your child be had he grown up in his birth family?

Jen: Although he wouldn't have had to struggle with what it means to be adopted, Colin would have missed the rich experiences he has had. His value system would be fragmented, his concept of family unclear. Instead of his "Special Jen," I'd be his tired, frustrated mother.

Jana: Ari would not be Jewish, vegetarian, or living in Hawaii if he had grown up with his family of origin. He also might not be as widely traveled, spoiled, or, as a transracial adoptee, as sensitive to issues of diversity. He might not be in private school, might not have been tested early for learning differences. As for his personality, I'm not sure it would have been different. Who he is now includes who he might have been.

I am not a better mother to Ari than his birthmother might have been, just one with more resources. This part is hard to say without sounding arrogant, but the reality is that Ari has had many more opportunities growing up with us than he would have had with Martie—something she was the first to recognize.

What are the best—and worst—parts about being a birthmother/adoptive mother?

Jen: The best part about being in an open adoption is that I am at peace. Colin and I are still a part of each other's lives, yet he is so happy and deeply rooted in his family that sometimes I forget that he's not their flesh and blood. Knowing he has the life I wanted for him allows me to move forward in mine. The worst part about being a birthmother is that I will never have moments that make being Colin's mom the greatest thing on earth.

Jana: One of the best parts of being an adoptive mom is that I don't expect my son to be a mini-me. The worst part is having our legitimacy as a family questioned and the love I have for my child viewed as less intense than a biological mom's.

How has this experience changed you?

Jen: It has changed me in the most profound way. I saw in Marie the mother I wanted to be. She is a powerful role model and has influenced the person I am today.

Jana: I, too, feel profoundly changed. Becoming a parent—through biology or adoption—is a daunting responsibility that makes you grow up fast. Adopting a child of another race changed the way I see the world. It awakened me to racism, forced me to figure out where I stand, required

me to reach for help, and empowered me to speak out. Thanks to adoption, I have become bolder and more humble at the same time.

Would your adoption be different if it were not open?

Jen: It simply wouldn't be. I chose open adoption for Colin to give our relationship a beginning, not an end—to say, "I cannot raise you, but I will never leave you."

Jana: I think that I would fantasize about Ari's first mother, and I might be tempted to spare my son the uncomfortable parts of his story. Open adoption forces you to be honest—with yourself and your child—about the sad and happy realities that built your family. It gives your child more relationships to negotiate, with the possible reward of feeling whole.

What challenges has open adoption posed for you?

Jen: There were times when Renée and I didn't agree, and I worried that I might jeopardize our relationship if I spoke my mind. Painstakingly, I learned we could withstand disagreements. I wanted Colin fully vaccinated; she wasn't sure. I wouldn't sign away my parental rights early; she couldn't understand why. I wanted to be Colin's only mom in the hospital, while she was preparing to stay with him in case he needed her. Ultimately, I had to decide what I needed to let go of and what I needed to talk about.

Jana: At times I've had to push Ari to write a letter or call his birthmother. I don't want Ari to see the relationship as a chore.

Has openness been good or bad for your child?

Jen: For Colin, adoption means he can ask his parents about the day he was born and they can tell him everything because they were there. It means he got to squeal in delight to learn that we have the same mole in the same place.

Jana: The premise of open adoption is telling the truth, and that jibes with our family values. There are some practical benefits, too. My son has someone other than his parents to go to for first-hand answers to his questions. He can see a family resemblance in her, and that is important beyond words. Open adoption squelches the tendency to fantasize about his birthmother, about the reason she made an adoption plan, and about the life he might have led. But the lives of his birth and adoptive families are not interchangeable. Ari must reconcile the differences between his life and the lives of his birth siblings.

Do you have any regrets?

Jen: No. When Colin was born, he was perfect, and so was the moment Michael and Renée first held him. I knew the plan I'd made for him meant he'd be given a life as close to perfect as he was. Even so, I needed to be his first mother before I could say "no regrets." I kept him right next to me in my hospital room. I breastfed him, cuddled him, and soothed him when he cried.

Jana: I regret that I wasted so much time worrying about how my son would turn out. I regret that we didn't press harder to meet Ari's birthfather. Above all, I remind myself that open adoption is additive: that loving your birth family doesn't mean you love your adoptive family any less—and vice versa.

Jennifer Davidson is a freelance writer and adoption educator in Northern California, where she lives with her family. Jana Wolff is the author of Secret Thoughts of an Adoptive Mother. She lives with her family in Honolulu.

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