

The definition of “family” has different meanings for many people, and families touched by adoption are no exception. Some may feel that “family” can only include either the adoptive parents *or* the birth parents, or be unsure of how to blend the two. There is much complexity around the meaning of “family” for those touched by adoption, but I hope that doesn't hold anyone back from choosing adoption. As an adoptee, I'm thankful that I'm able to include my adoptive and biological families in my definition of “family” and I want to share how our relationships have grown over the years.

However, I don't want to sugar coat the challenges of adoption. Adoption has a very significant emotional impact on *everyone* involved – adoptee, birth parents, and adoptive parents. I hope to show that the challenges experienced by those involved in adoption can be overcome; that it is possible to create strong, positive relationships between adoptee, adoptive parents, and birth parents despite the complex emotions one feels at different stages of the adoption process.

My Beginning:

I was born in January 1986 and my family was one of the first at our adoption agency to go through the entire process as an open adoption. My biological parents selected my adoptive parents based on their hand-written letters and they were able to meet prior to my birth. When my adoptive parents were scheduled to take me home my biological parents insisted that they hand me to my parents instead of the social workers. I love that they caught that moment in a photograph of the five of us. That photo now lives in my childhood photo album, providing a glimpse into how our lives are intertwined. That early moment together set the stage in creating a positive environment in which our relationships could grow.

After they came together following my birth, my adoptive and biological parents shared letters and photos through the adoption agency. After a year or so, they felt comfortable communicating directly with each other and the five of us met when I was about 1½ years old. From an early age my adoptive parents talked with me openly and in a positive light about what it meant to be adopted and when I was three years old we met with my birth mom at a park. After that, we waited until I was 10 to meet again. My adoptive parents felt it might be confusing for me to interact directly with my biological parents in my early developmental years, but also felt it was important for them to stay connected with my biological parents and so continued exchanging letters until they felt I was old enough to meet with them face to face.

Cultivating open relationships:

When I was ten, my adoptive parents felt I was ready to re-meet my birth parents. I was so eager to meet them! My biological parents had split up within a year of my birth but they had remained in contact over the years, so all five of us were able to meet together. That occasion marked the beginning of a gradual increase in the amount of time my adoptive parents and I spent with both of my biological parents, although we didn't always see both of them at the same time (my birth parents were pursuing different paths and new relationships at that point).

Throughout my high school and early adulthood I met and spent time with members of both sides of my extended biological families. Although I currently only see them a couple times per year (or less), I have good relationships with my biological grandparents, aunts, uncles, and four half-siblings. My adoptive parents are also invested in having relationships with my birth

families. Their openness and support has helped me feel comfortable with considering both families to be part of a large extended family.

Keeping track of all the relationships can make a person's head spin, but it's awesome to be able to share important life events together. As an adolescent and young adult my birth parents joined my adoptive parents in attending activities such as lacrosse games, horse shows, snowboard competitions, and graduations in addition to casual opportunities to catch up over coffee, lunch or dinner. My adoptive mom and I have also spent several holidays with my biological mom and her extended family. I have travelled to California as recently as April 2011 to visit my birth dad's parents, siblings and their kids (my grandparents, aunt/uncle, and cousins). It's so cool to know and spend time with so many people from my birth family; to be able to have those typical family discussions about whose nose, eyes, or hair I have or how my love of horses, athletics, and the outdoors runs in the family.

Processing what it means to be adopted:

When I wrote my college application essays eight years ago, I was encouraged by my advisor to write about something I'm proud of as a unique part of who I am. Adoption leapt out at me as the obvious choice. In writing my college essay, I struggled with the terminology of being "given up" for adoption. It felt too harsh, rejecting, and cold. I felt that it ignored and devalued the emotional complexity of adoption for me, my parents, and my birth parents. That's when I decided that I was not "given" but "gifted" from my birth parents to my parents. Using this phrase was my first conscious attempt to gain a sense of control and ownership of my heritage.

When I was the age that my birth parents were when I was born (around age 20) I was struck by how overwhelming it would be to be pregnant at that point in life; how scary it would have been for them to try to decide what the best decision would be. For a long time, I tried to understand my adoption by *logically* thinking about what my adoptive and biological families went through instead of feeling my own *emotions*. Since then, I've questioned my history as it affects my sense of self, my sense of belonging and my relationships and have allowed myself to feel and process conflicting emotions.

Having had a positive "story" of adoption throughout my childhood, adolescence and early college years, it was scary to begin questioning how adoption might have had a negative impact on my sense of trust, self-esteem, belonging, and feeling of being wanted and loved. I felt guilty about feeling sudden waves of resentment toward my birth parents for not choosing to raise me. I felt anxiety about feeling pulled between my many family members who wanted to spend time with me, worrying that I would make one person feel less loved than another based on how I spent my time. I always considered myself lucky to have strong relationships with all my parents and was afraid that I couldn't remain grateful for our relationships while also allowing myself to process conflicting emotions.

The openness in my relationships with both families has been very important, especially during periods of self-exploration. It gives me a chance to deal with conflicting emotions. I am still appreciative of having so many people in my life that love me, but now I can begin to feel that gratitude is based on my emotional experience instead of based on the perspectives of others.

I now know that understanding the experiences of my birth and adoptive parents is important, but it's also crucial that I process my own emotions— even if they may cause feelings of insecurity or hurt in birth or adoptive family members. I needed the chance to work through the emotions that come with the complexity of adoption, just as my adoptive parents and birth parents needed to when choosing adoption and probably still do at times. For me, it's been really helpful to have others encourage me to talk about my emotions as they come up, whether to a family member, friend, mentor, or counselor. At times I found it helpful to talk to someone who is not emotionally involved in the adoption as it allows space for exploration and processing without feeling the need to hold back to protect loved ones, and I would encourage others to try this as well.

Because I have had such an open adoption, I'm sometimes asked whether I feel conflicted about which parents are my "real" parents. The truth is that both sets are real and hold equal importance in my life. Yet, when I talk about my "parents" I am referring to my adoptive parents. I love my birth parents tremendously and they are a huge part of my identity, but my adoptive parents will always be Mom and Dad.

Concluding thoughts & hopes for current and future adoption triads:

If all this sounds completely overwhelming and complicated, it is! However, even with all the complicated relationships and different feelings I've had about my adoption over the years, I still wouldn't have it any other way. I've learned that love and openness have allowed me to process adoption in an authentic way – and have become qualities that I cherish in relationships outside of family.

I feel love and gratitude to my adoptive parents for loving me so deeply, for being so supportive of and involved in forming relationships with my biological families, and for understanding my search for self as an adoptee and as a human being. I feel love and gratitude toward my birth parents and their families for welcoming me into their lives, allowing me to connect with my biological heritage through more than just names and faces.

The open nature of my adoption has allowed for a deep sharing of ourselves and our emotional journeys that I believe has not only benefited me, but also my adoptive and biological parents. I hope that by sharing my story, those who are considering adoption or are already part of an adoption triad will be able to have faith that through the ups and downs, the experience can be guided by the light of openness, hope, and limitless love.