

Adoptive Parents' Attitudes Toward Openness

“IT’S TIME TO SPEAK FOR OURSELVES”

Adoptive Parents' Attitudes Toward Openness in Adoption Records:
Summary of A Study of NYS Adoptive Parents Conducted in 1994-1995

A survey was distributed to adoptive parents in New York State through agencies and adoptive parent groups and associations. Response to the survey resulted in a sample of 1,274 adoptive parents in 743 adoptive families.

Characteristics of the Sample: The mean age of adopted children in the survey was 9.07 years. Adopted children were predominantly female and white. The majority of children in the sample were adopted through a public agency, and lived in the home as a foster child prior to the adoption. Compared with children adopted privately or through a private agency, children in the sample who were adopted through a public agency were found to enter an adoptive home at a significantly older age, and take longer to be adopted. Children who were of an “other” race were more likely to be female and to be adopted internationally. Compared with white children and children of an “other” race, African American children were more likely to live in the home as foster children prior to adoption, spend longer time in the home prior to adoption, and be adopted at an older age.

Mean age of both adoptive parents and spouses/partners was approximately 47 years. Adoptive parents and spouses/partners were predominantly white, married, with college degrees, employed professionally, and members of an adoptive parent group. The majority of adoptive families were two-parent, dual-earner families. Single-parent families were more likely to be headed by an African-American female, and an unemployed parent. Adoptive families were, on average, larger than families in the general New York State population. For the majority of families in the sample this was their first adoption. Approximately 17 percent of sample families had other adopted/foster children living in the home. Thirty-eight percent of sample adoptions were interracial.

The Adoptive Child’s Contact With Their Birth Parents: Only 16.6 percent of adopted children in the sample had any contact with a birth parent, and this contact was likely to be seldom but not regular. Approximately 40 percent of adopted children in the sample knew the name of their birth mother, and 23 percent knew the name of their birth father. If there was contact with a birth parent, adopted children in the sample were far more likely to have contact with their birth mother compared with their birth father. White adopted children and adopted children of an “other” race were far more likely to have contact with their birth mother compared with their birth father. Children who lived in the

home as a foster child prior to the adoption were far more likely to have contact with a birth parent. Older adopted children were far more likely to want to maintain contact with a birth parent. Adopted children who lived in the home as a foster child prior to the adoption were far less likely to want to maintain contact with a birth parent.

Adoptive Parents' Attitudes Toward Openness in Adoption Records: In the survey instrument adoptive parents were asked their opinions relating to a set of three questions regarding various aspects of the law covering a child's access to their adoption records (birth certificates). These questions were:

* Statement 1. NYS law should allow an adult adoptee to obtain a copy of his or her original birth certificate.

* Statement 2. At what age should an adopted person have access to his/her birth certificate?

* Statement 3. An adult adoptee's right to obtain an original birth certificate should be retroactive. In other words, all adult adoptees should have access regardless of when they were adopted.

In response to Statement 1, 83.7 percent of adopted parents and 72.6 percent of spouses/partners either agreed or strongly agreed that an adult adoptee should be able to obtain a copy of his/her original birth certificate. Only 8.8 percent of adoptive parents and 20.7 percent of spouses/partners disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement. In response to Statement 2, 39.2 percent of adoptive parents and 31.6 percent of spouses/partners thought that access to birth certificates should be made available at age 18. The majority of both adoptive parents (44.3 percent) and spouses/partners (42.0 percent) thought that such access should be reserved until age 21. In response to Statement 3, 78.9 percent of adoptive parents and 66.0 percent of spouses/partners agreed that access to birth certificates should be retroactive.

In summary, the majority of adoptive parents thought that New York State law should allow an adoptee to obtain a copy of their original birth certificate, and that this access should be retroactive (access should be given regardless of when the child was adopted). The majority of adoptive parents thought that access to an original birth certificate should be restricted to a time when the adopted child has reached maturity (21 or older). African American adoptive parents and those who adopted their child through a public agency were, on average, more open to the concept of an adopted child having access to their birth records.

Using a summary measure of openness it was found that older adoptive parents were significantly more open to the concept of disclosure in adoption records. It was found that older, white (compared with African-American) and male spouses/partners were significantly more open to the concept of disclosure in adoption records. Furthermore,

spouses/partners living in homes where the adopted child was white (compared with African American) or where the child had lived in the home as a foster child prior to the adoption, were significantly more open to the concept of disclosure in adoption records.

Dividing sample parents by gender, it was found that older female adoptive parents were significantly more open to the concept of disclosure in adoption records, and female adoptive parents were significantly more open to the concept of disclosure in adoption records, and female adoptive parents who had fostered their child prior to adoption were significantly less open to the concept of disclosure in adoption records. Male adoptive parents who had fostered their child prior to adoption, and those who had adopted a white child (compared with an African American child) were significantly less open to the concept of disclosure in adoption records.

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