

9 TIPS

to Long-Term Success in Adoptive Parenting

Before we get to nine tips for long-term success in adoptive parenting, let's uncover a new way to frame adoption, and let's throw out the labels we typically use to describe contact (or lack of) in adoption scenarios.

Open Adoption Spectrum



Closed (no contact)

Open (lots of contact)

Such a spectrum describes an undefined way of measuring something we call "contact." Are we measuring quantity of contact? Quality of contact? Type of contact? Something else? To be more inclusive and accurate, we should be paying attention to something else.

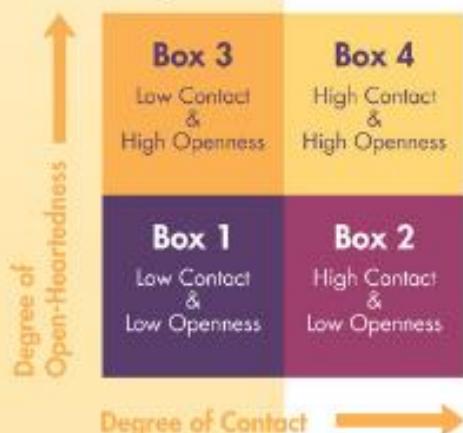
The premise of the book, *The Open-Hearted Way to Open Adoption: Helping Your Child Grow Up Whole*, is that adoption creates a split in a person between their biology (the DNA we're born with) and their biography (the life that's written by those we call family). Openness helps heal that split. When it comes to integrating oneself, openness is the key, not contact (though desire for contact often results from openness).

You don't need to have contact with your adopted child's birth parents in order help him/her heal the adoption split. But to maximize your chances of raising a well-functioning person who is primed to heal that split and who wants you along on their journey in building their identity, you will want to cultivate openness.

Our spectrum becomes a grid.

I define openness (open-heartedness) as dealing with What Is. The opposite—closedness—is when we are not dealing with What Is. We might be dealing in fantasy or not dealing at all, just ignoring reality.

Open Adoption Grid



Box 1 describes a traditional closed adoption. Not only was there very little contact or identifying information available, but people were counseled to act as if adoption didn't matter to anyone involved—the opposite of dealing with What Is.

Box 2 describes an obligatory open adoption. Contact is offered as part of an imposed agreement. But people here may not be ready and willing to deal with the complexities of adoption as they arise over time.

Box 3 describes many international, foster, and domestic adoptions, cases in which birth family is unavailable, unknown, unsafe, or unreachable. Though contact may not happen, parents here still deal mindfully with what comes up, and they respond rather than react to adoption issues.

Box 4 describes an extended family model. We may not always adore the people we're connected to as family, but we do what we can to make family relationships work.

1

Remember that even “normal” parenting stretches you.

Just as you’re going to figure out how to deal with toilet training, choosing schools, middle school drama, the drugs/sex/alcohol talks, and all the other quintessential and scary parenting moments, you will find ways to help your son or daughter deal with the question of “**who am I?**” over the years. You already trust that you will figure out regular parenting issues; trust that you’re going to figure out adoptive parenting issues, too.

Commit yourself to the truth. Delivering truth will pay dividends in receiving your child’s trust.

Be prepared, always, to deal in What Is.

2

See from your son or daughter’s perspective.

What would it feel like to be raised by people with whom you have no genetic connection? Would you be curious about the “**other family**” and how you may have been a part of it? Would you want your parents to be alongside you as you wonder, or would you feel as though you need to keep your thoughts secret so as not to hurt them?

If you have to err, err on the side of openness, of dealing with What Is, because that is ultimately what you’d like your son or daughter to be able to do.

3

Attune to your son or daughter.

Attunement is an extension of empathy. Develop the practice of attuning to your son or daughter, **being gloriously present with them**, with who they are each day. Practice seeing things through their eyes, the way they feel now. And the next now. And all the future nows.

Ways to cultivate attunement include:

Face-to-face interactions:

Board games, card games, laughing together (no screens).

Side-by-side interactions:

Driving, walking, hiking. Without the requirement for eye contact, sensitive topics can seem less threatening.

Active interactions:

Movement gets flow going within a person and between people. Try outdoor games like tag or shooting hoops.

Stillness:

This “nothing time,” time to just be together, is like the mortar between the bricks. My kids are teens, and they still ask to cuddle some nights during that relaxed time when defenses are down and closeness is easily attainable.



4

Tune into yourself.

Detect and resolve any triggers you may have about your family-building story. Your son or daughter will have a “spidey sense” whenever they get too close to one of your hot buttons.

You don't have to be triggerless – **the point is not to be triggerless** – but you should develop a way of knowing when you're being triggered so that rather than reacting from a hurt place, you can pause for a moment and choose how to respond. **Your connection with your child is influenced by the connection you have with yourself.**



5

Attend to your own sore spots that arise from grief, jealousy, insecurity, etc.

Grief:

Adoption doesn't address the loss of the dream of a biological child. You have filled the crib, but you may still occasionally be reminded of your never-to-be-manifested ghost child. How are you going to react/respond when you feel a sudden pang of grief? Will you be mature enough to recognize this is happening?

Jealousy:

Your embryo adopted child was created from a set of genes different from you and your spouse.

You may have times when you recognize some qualities that are simply due to genetic differences. *Where did THIS come from? I'm math challenged—I don't know how to deal with gifted math. Or, I thought I'd raise an athlete, but instead I'm in music territory and I don't know music! Or, I'm a relaxed person—I don't know how to deal with such a yearning for motion.* At times, you may wonder why this is so hard for you and so easy for others.

Insecurity:

There are genetic parents out there. That thought may make adoptive parents sometimes feel less than. *What if my son would have been better off with someone else? What if I'm messing this up for him? I feel like a fake.*

If you've had any of these fleeting thoughts, you're not alone. They're common and they're normal. What's dysfunctional is to squash them down and bury them rather than allowing yourself to feel them and let them pass.

When we can attune to what is going on within ourselves, we can make sure our below-the-surface emotions don't cause above-the-surface words and actions to erupt from us without our consent or awareness. Being mindful takes us from a place of reacting to a place of responding. **We choose from a conscious level rather than have a knee-jerk reaction from a subconscious level.**

6

Understand that what seems like a one-time event to you will be a lifelong journey for your son or daughter.

For you, bringing your son or daughter home was the happy ending you'd longed for. For your child though, that was just the beginning. While it may seem like a discrete event to you, **it's a gradual journey to your son or daughter over the coming decades. You want to be invited on their journey.**

7

Keep your eye on the big picture: raising an identity-integrated adult.

Be present so you can attune, but also keep your eye on the long-term goal: developing your son or daughter into a well-functioning, identity-integrated adult.

Have you noticed I have used the term “your son or daughter” at least as often as I have used “your child?” It’s because we need to de-infantilize them. It’s so easy for us to get stuck thinking our sons and daughters are forever children, but they’re not. **Our goal is to eventually get them to independence and adulthood.**

Let’s also talk about the tendency to delay difficult conversations. When we’re figuring out how to deliver tricky information to our children, it needs to be done in an age-appropriate way, in which the information delivered matches the cognitive stage of your son or daughter (attune!).

But kicking the can down the road indefinitely doesn’t resolve a problem and often allows it to grow by the time you are ready deal with it. Then you may have the added problem of your child feeling like they can’t trust you to tell them their story – they can’t trust you period. **We need to make sure we don’t miss our windows of timing to tell.**

8

Allow your son or daughter the fluidity to process over time.

Today doesn’t imply tomorrow. In other words, don’t lock your son or daughter into one way forever. *Oh, he’s not the curious sort.* Or *Oh, she has never asked about it.* Things can change for him or her over the years, so allow your kiddo room to wonder. **Stay attuned so that you know if something has shifted in your child’s processing of their story.**

Don’t expect your child to have the same relationship with their adoption that others you know have with theirs. People may have an assumption like, *My best friend was adopted and it was closed and she’s fine, so our child will also be fine with closedness.* Each era and each person and each situation is unique. **Your child deserves to find their own way and have their own preferences honored as they emerge and change.**

These tips were originally presented as a webinar for the Embryo Adoption Awareness Center, which promotes the donation and adoption of embryos remaining from IVF treatments. View that webinar here: <https://youtu.be/F3qWBNajMxg>

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9

Neutralize the emotional adoption charge to gain clarity.

Take a situation that is triggering you and reimagine it without the adoption charge. Then ask, **how would I handle this if there were no adoption component?**

Example: During a communication interchange with the placing parent they give you some parenting advice based upon their experience.

Without a moment for reflection and discernment, maybe you get so immediately mad and feel so disrespected that you have the urge to shut down the relationship and keep them out of your lives – after all, you’re the parent!

Or, maybe you reimagine the situation in which your sister-in-law is the one who gives the advice. Now how would you handle this? You may simply thank her for her insight and move on in the conversation.

Without the emotional adoption charge, you are better able to decide on a rational way to respond.

The right response and right words tend to flow from an open, attuned, heart-centered GPS. Through these open-hearted practices, we are better prepared to help our sons and daughters integrate their various pieces and heal the adoption split.