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*Partners* is published by the Coalition for Children, Youth & Families, dedicated to recruiting families for Wisconsin children in foster care and providing support to foster and adoptive families. The *Partners* Newsletter is written and compiled by members of the Coalition for Children, Youth & Families staff.

*This issue of Partners focuses on relationships. The triad of birth parents, children (whether foster or adoptive), and families who are fostering or adopting is complex. Questions arise around shared parenting while in foster care, myths about birth parents, complexities of law and relationships after adoption – including children wondering about search and continued relationships with birth relatives.*

*There are no easy answers to these issues. Wisconsin has had a very strong search law for many years for adoptees after 18 – but it does not have an openness law as do many other states. Yet, at the same time, we have a huge degree of “openness” that is happening informally between adoptive parents and birth parents and/or their extended family.*

## Working Together for Forever – The Benefits of Working with Birth Parents

Over the years, working with birth parents has become a widely encouraged and growing trend among foster and adoptive families. When children are abruptly moved from their birth family to a foster or adoptive home, they often struggle to adjust to the various changes associated with the transition. Although it can sometimes be heart-wrenching and emotionally challenging for foster and adoptive families, it's an even more difficult time for the children involved. To help make the transition a little easier, you, as foster and adoptive parents, can choose to find ways for your children to maintain contact with birth family members, which can offer a wide array of benefits to everyone involved.

Working with birth parents, or shared parenting, as it is sometimes referred to, is the development of a relationship between foster/adoptive families and birth families where the focus is the well-being or best interest of the child. It happens successfully and establishes positive outcomes when all parties are willing to collaborate and work together to raise children. Birth family members are some of the most powerful individuals who have the ability to influence your child's overall well-being and behaviors, especially when they are in out-of-home care settings.

Facilitating regular and healthy connections between your foster or adoptive children and their birth parents can often help minimize grief and loss issues for both your children and their birth parents. When a child can see the rapport develop between his or her birth parents and foster/adoptive parents, it may ease his or her anxiety about the separation and positively impact his or her behaviors. Children often do best when foster/adoptive families and birth families are cooperative, non-judgmental towards one another, openly communicate, and work together to resolve issues. This alignment between birth and foster/adoptive parents provides children with the signal that they

When you have been in the foster care/adoption world as long as I have, you gain a wide perspective on the complexity of relationships. My first job was to work with pregnant women who were considering adoption plans. This was the late 60's and the "times they were a-changin'." No longer were young teens shuttled off to a home for pregnant women, but instead we started working with teens to stay at home with their parents or be in a temporary family during the pregnancy. We talked to young dads, as well, to get medical information and to walk them through the implications of having a child. We helped young moms who decided to parent their new children and connected them with services and support.

We stayed linked to women after the pregnancy and adoption – especially when there was a medical issue for the baby. One woman stayed connected for more than 10 years, reporting each year on the medical condition of her family and herself, since there was a serious genetic disease that ran in her family. Shortly after I left that agency, it moved into only licensing adoptive families who were open to disclosing their name to the birth parents and vice versa, because the agency had come to understand that keeping the door open for information sharing was very important.

We understood that terminating a parent's rights wasn't the end for a birth parent – but the start of a life with 'what ifs' and thinking about their child. One judge would always tell young women that this was a closed chapter in their lives and it was as if it had never happened. Each time, I would walk out of the courtroom with a sobbing woman and have to explain that the judge understands the law – but not the lifelong decision she had made.

As a school social worker, I routinely connected with birth families that were struggling and the child welfare agency that was involved. I don't know if I ever met a birth parent whose child was removed who didn't love and care for the child – but, what I did see was birth parents who were overwhelmed with their troubled lives.

Today, we are so much further along in understanding that roots, histories, and medical information are critical. We know that keeping connections during foster care and adoption means that children can understand their past and chart their future. Despite our knowledge about what is right and good, living it can be incredibly difficult – even with the best will on everyone's part.

We are here to help you navigate this incredibly wonderful, but sometimes messy, relationship. As all relationships go, including marriage, it is the process in which we live – challenges, opportunities, wonderful and crazy moments. So give us a call or an email when you need support. We may not have all the answers, but we will be here for you.

Best to you all in this journey!



Colleen M. Ellingson  
Chief Executive Officer



# Searching for Connections



*"You're not my real mother!"*

How many adoptive parents have heard that comment made in anger? Sometimes the underlying sentiment is really, "I want you to be the mom who will never leave me. I also want to know about my other mother."

Knowing our background and where we came from helps us all figure out how we fit into the world. If you grew up with your biological family, you know who you look like, where your family came from, what talents or characteristics are typical in your family, and at least some of your medical history. If you were adopted, you need to know that information, too.

There are many reasons to search for birth families, but the most common reasons given by people who were adopted include:

- I'm curious. I'd like to know what my birth parents look like, whether they're doing OK, if they had other children, and if I'm like them in my traits and interests. One teen wondered about his nationality. Was he Irish or Polish or Norwegian? "I don't know what I really am, and that bothers me."
- I need to know the genetic and medical information that might affect me, or might affect my own children.
- I want to know why the adoption took place. I've been told that my birth parents couldn't take care of me, but I need to know more than that.

When you think about these reasons to search, you may come to the same conclusion that researchers arrived at: ***That the desire to search likely has nothing to do with any kind of feelings about the adoptive parents.*** It is simply a desire to know about oneself.

A 13-year-old who reconnected with her birth mother, tells this story in *How It Feels to be Adopted* by Jill Krementz:

"I have a friend who lives next door and when I showed him the pictures of my birth mother, he asked me, 'Are you going to move back to Florida now?' And I laughed really hard and said, 'That just goes to show that some people don't understand—when you're adopted by people, these people are your real parents. Finding your birth mother is just filling up a gap that makes you feel you belong.'"

She goes on to say,

"As soon as I searched and found the information I was looking for, I felt more worthwhile in the world—as though I belonged better. Beforehand, a part of me had always been missing."

If you know some information about your child's history, sharing it, in an age-appropriate way, will often satisfy your child's curiosity. In *Who Am I?* by Charlene Giannetti, Elizabeth, age 11, says, "I just want to know my birth mother's name." After her mother gave her the answer, Elizabeth was satisfied...at least for now. More importantly, Elizabeth was reassured that it was OK to ask questions about her birth mother.

*Continued on page 7*





## Debunking Some Myths about Birth Parents

For many of you, as foster and adoptive parents, building positive connections with your child's birth parent is a regular or ongoing occurrence. Sometimes it's an easy, friendly, open relationship. Other times the communication can be more challenging.

In our role here at the Coalition, we often talk with foster and adoptive parents who have expressed fears about working with a child's birth parent or birth family members. Many times, those fears are born from what we have all seen portrayed in made-for-television movies, or read about in sensationalized news stories that can make it seem that challenging interactions with birth parents are the rule and not the exception.

In reality, the vast majority of birth parents are not involving themselves in the types of made-for-late-night-TV-reality-show types of behaviors. In fact, they are probably not that much different than you or me.

One of the realities is that these parents were probably faced with extreme adverse challenges and circumstances in their lives, such as past or current trauma, past or present abuse, neglect, grief and loss issues, economic challenges, and a lack of parenting experience or support, to just name a few major life experiences that can have dramatic impacts on their parenting journey.

Being able to form and maintain strong relationships with your child's birth parents can be extremely beneficial for everyone involved. In order to help you and your children build positive relationships, we are highlighting and providing some important information about a few common myths that seem to be prevalent concerning birth parents.

### **Myth #1: Birth parents do not want to parent**

Most often, it is not that parents do not want to be parents, but rather, they may not know how to parent and be able to appropriately respond to challenging behavior on the part of their child or children.

Imagine if no one ever showed you how to deal with a screaming child except with harsh words or physical discipline. Many of us parent much like we were parented and it sometimes takes outside support and assistance to teach parents how they can be the best that they can be for their children.

Many birth parents have not been taught parenting skills. Furthermore, some of the parenting styles that they were taught might not have been the parenting styles that many of us have learned over the years.

We can all agree that parenting is one of the most difficult jobs there is and just think how more challenging this

One foster parent, who practices shared parenting, said to her foster child's birth mother, "You sure have good ideas about how to handle Juan's tantrums. I'm glad you have shared this with me."

important job of raising children would be without the necessary skills, knowledge, experience, or training.

**Myth #2: Birth parents couldn't possibly love their children**

This is most likely the biggest myth out there about birth parents. Birth parents love their children as much as any other parent. One birth parent described their feelings by sharing, "As they left my house, I felt that a piece of my heart was being ripped out."

Love is rarely the issue; rather, what generally leads to a child entering the child welfare system is an issue of safety or provisions. If a parent cannot keep their child safe and well-provided for, chances are that child will enter into out-of-home care.

As a result of having their children placed into foster care, birth parents experience both anger and fear to an extreme extent, which can seem like they don't love their children. In reality, their reactions are more often than not the result of intense love. One foster mom said, "My heart will break for his biological mother if he is taken from her. I am a mom and can't imagine how that would feel."

**Myth #3: Birth parents don't know important details about their children**

In truth, a birth parent or family member is often the greatest source of information about children in care or who are in the process of being adopted. Just because a birth parent has had some challenging times that have resulted in the loss of their child doesn't mean that they don't know what comforts their child, what motivates them, or even the activities that make them happy.

One foster parent, who practices shared parenting, said to her foster child's birth mother, "You sure have good ideas about how to handle Juan's tantrums. I'm glad you have shared this with me." A birth mother may know that turning Elmo on is the way to help their child step out of a tantrum or that offering a reward of Skittles will help Johnny with potty training.

**Myth #4: Birth parents are disengaged parents**

It may appear that birth parents are not trying to make positive changes in order to regain custody of their children; however, often times, birth parents become truly frozen in their grief.

One birth parent, in the midst of such pain, told her worker, "My children need and want to be with me. If you're helping us, then help us together... I'll do whatever it takes; you can still make your home visits, every day if you would like. Just please release my children to me."

Many birth parents become paralyzed by feelings of grief as they work through the stages from denial to anger to sadness. They may also feel completely overwhelmed by all the tremendous life changes that are being required of them in order to have their children return. These may include moving, finding a job, working within the guidelines of the child welfare system, attending parenting classes or therapy, and completely changing their parenting style. They may be questioning who they are as a person, as well, which only adds to the immense amount of pressure and stress that they are experiencing during this uncertain time.

No two people are the same and, of course, everyone reacts to difficult situations in different ways. However, we hope this information has addressed some of your fears, worries, and questions about working with birth parents, as well as portraying a more true and accurate portrait of birth parents.

The majority of birth parents are hurting. They are feeling many intense emotions of anger, sadness, and grief that can be easily misunderstood and misinterpreted as any of the above myths. The words of one birth mother really say it best: "I was so angry at myself because my children had to suffer for what I'd done. I cried myself to sleep many nights. My emotions were really running wild because I loved my kids so much and it hurt so much to lose them."

# Openness in Adoption: A Balanced Approach

There is a growing trend in adoption toward more and more levels of openness between birth family members and adoptive family members. In part, the changes are happening because of the benefits that openness can have for children when they have and maintain connections with a birth parent or other members from their birth family.

Many families already have some type of contact with their children's birth families. Others have considered openness at some level, but are not really sure what it is or what it could look like or mean for their family. At this time, Wisconsin does not have a law regarding open adoption agreements. If you're considering having or increasing the contact and relationship with your child's birth family members, there are surely a number of questions and points of consideration running through your mind.

## How contact can look

There are a lot of ways to open, keep, and maintain contact. Technology has opened new doors in recent years, making staying in contact easier, especially if there is geographical distance to consider. Phone calls, text messages, video chat, email, and social media (such as Facebook), are all ways to stay connected. You can also keep connected through face-to-face interactions, or by sharing photos and letters.

The exact shape and feel of openness will be unique for every family. For some, their child's birth family is an extension of their family. If you have or are adopting through the foster care system, you may already have a relationship with your child's birth family. In that case, it's sometimes easier to carry forward the existing relationship into an ongoing one. For other families, contact occurs a few times per year; sometimes in-person visits or through letters, pictures, and emails.

### The pros: What are some of the benefits?

- It's natural for children who have been adopted to have questions about themselves, their past and where they came from. Having an open connection can help minimize any feelings that your child might have about missing a piece or part of their lives.
- Having an ongoing relationship already in place can mean that your child won't have to go through the sometimes emotionally-taxing and difficult process of search for his or her biological roots later in life.
- Continued contact could also make it easier for your child to find other birth relatives. It gives them the ability to feel connected to where they came from and to have access to family and genetic history.
- An on-going connection can help your child maintain important relationships and supports with their siblings, grandparents, aunts and uncles, in addition to their birth mother or father, and to know their story fully. And, it can also give them peace of mind to know their other family is okay.
- This contact can also reassure your child that it is okay to ask questions and talk about their birth family and about being adopted without the fear of hurting your feelings.

### The cons: What are some of the challenges my family should consider?

- First of all, it's important to recognize that this topic and these relationships are emotionally-charged. Both you as a parent and your child may feel the impact of continuing a relationship with members of your child's birth family. After all, regardless of your child's history with his or her family, there is an emotional tie.
- Life circumstances may change and disappointment can happen. As a result, there may be inconsistency and unrealistic expectations. Be prepared to support your child through these potential ups and downs. Always have your child's safety in mind.
- Boundary issues may arise with some birth family members. Everyone is trying to figure out how they fit in and what their new role is. It's new territory for both families involved. Everyone is trying to co-exist, continue to be involved with, and provide the best care for your child. Making a plan upfront can alleviate some of these issues, as can negotiating expectations beforehand.
- Contact can change over time depending on how relationships develop or deteriorate, as well as the development level of your child.

Families can also utilize professional supports, such as therapists or adoption workers, to think about whether they are comfortable or not with contact. There are a number of forums, support groups, and blogs by other adoptive parents that can help navigate birth family contacts and offer places to seek advice. Know that each state has different laws and regulations around openness. What may be law in Oregon is not necessarily pertinent in Wisconsin.

Developing or maintaining relationships with your child's birth family can work best when both families work together in the best interest of the child. It is all about finding the right balance for your child and family and developing good relationships. If you are ever unsure about where to go or what to do next, you can always contact us at the Coalition – from locating essential resources to just listening to your story, we are here to help.



Sometimes the person who was adopted will hesitate to search, thinking that searching will hurt the feelings of their adoptive parents. Sentiments like, “I don’t want to bring it up because I don’t want to hurt my mom and dad,” or “I think it would be hard on my parents because they might feel I don’t love them,” are fairly common among people who think about searching but decide against pursuing it.

These feelings also sometimes inhibit a child’s willingness to talk about adoption or birth parents at all. Keeping the door open for communication about adoption is critical. When you see a story in the news, or a character in a TV show who was adopted, you can use these as natural openings to bring up the subject of adoption. (For more ideas, see the Foster Care and Adoption Resource Center Tip Sheet “Talking to Your Children about Their Birth Parents”).

Often the need to search is only to find information, and not for an actual meeting with birth relatives. Maybe the search will lead to a desire to meet the birth family, but maybe not.

In Wisconsin, a person who was adopted can initiate a search at age 18. If the birth parents have signed an affidavit with the Wisconsin Adoption Search Program, then the birth parents’ contact information will be released. If they have decided that they would like to give their birth child the opportunity to meet them, a birth parent can complete the affidavit at any time. For more information and to find the forms regarding the Wisconsin Adoption Search Program, you can visit the Wisconsin Department of Children and Families

website: [http://dcf.wisconsin.gov/children/adoption/adoption\\_search/default.htm](http://dcf.wisconsin.gov/children/adoption/adoption_search/default.htm).

Even though the search process can begin at age 18, thoughts about searching might start at a much younger age. If your child expresses the desire to either find information or to meet birth relatives, you can support your child by acknowledging your child’s need for a connection to the past. You can help your child explore the reason for searching. And you can lay the groundwork to help your child be emotionally prepared if searching is a choice made in the future.

Being prepared emotionally and psychologically takes some time and effort. One young teen said, “If I ever decide to search, I would hope that I had some sort of stability as a person before I started digging into my past.” (*How It Feels to Be Adopted* by Jill Krentenz).

Here are some ideas on how to help your child emotionally prepare for searching:

- A basic approach to being prepared is to read about other people’s search and reunion experiences. You can help identify and gather books or articles. Read the search stories yourself first, and try to anticipate the questions your child might have. Discuss why people search, what their fears were, and what feelings they had, especially when things didn’t turn out the way a person hoped for. This may not be an easy conversation to have with your child, because it could bring up your child’s own fears and

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## Resources

### Resources from the Coalition Library

*Journeys after Adoption – Understanding Lifelong Issues*, by Jayne Schooler

*Searching for a Past*, by Jayne Schooler

*How it Feels to be Adopted*, by Jill Krementz

*Found: A Memoir*, by Jennifer Lauck

*Adoption Wisdom: A Guide to the Issues & Feelings of Adoption*, by Marlou Russell, PhD

*Because I Loved You: A Birthmother's View of Open Adoption*, by Patricia Dischler

*Silent Embrace*, by Ann & Amanda Angel

*Adopted Teens Only: A Survival Guide to Adolescence*, by Danae Gorbett

*Birthright: The Guide to Search and Reunion for Adoptees, Birthparents and Adoptive Parents*, by Jean A.S. Stauss

*Arms Wide Open: An Insight into Open Adoption*, by Jane Waters

*Making Room in Our Hearts: Keeping Family Ties through Open Adoption*, by Micky Duxbury

*The Open Adoption Book: A Guide to Adoption Without Tears*, by Bruce M. Rappaport

*The Open-Hearted Way to Open Adoption: Helping Your Child Grow Up Whole*, by Lori Holden

*Children of Open Adoption*, by Kathleen Silber and Patricia Artinez Doner

#### Children's Books

*Pugnose Has Two Special Families*, by Karis Kruzel

*Did My First Mother Love Me?*, by Kathryn Ann Miller

*We See the Moon*, by Carrie Kitze

*You're Not My Real Mother*, by Molly Friedrich

### Coalition Tip Sheets

#### To Search or Not to Search

<http://wiadopt.org/Portals/WIAadopt/Tipsheets/HonoringFamily/search.pdf>

#### Talking to Your Children about Their Birth Parents

<http://wiadopt.org/Portals/WIAadopt/Tipsheets/HonoringFamily/TalkingAboutBirthParents.pdf>

#### Planning Ahead: Working Together for Successful Interactions

<http://wiadopt.org/Portals/WIAadopt/Tipsheets/HonoringFamily/Transitions.pdf>

#### Shared Parenting: Putting the Needs of Children First

<http://wiadopt.org/Portals/WIAadopt/Tipsheets/HonoringFamily/SharedParenting.pdf>

#### Wisconsin Department of Children and Families Adoption Records Search Program

[http://dcf.wisconsin.gov/children/adoption/adoption\\_search/default.htm](http://dcf.wisconsin.gov/children/adoption/adoption_search/default.htm)

#### Working Together: Foster Families and Birth Parents

[https://www.childwelfare.gov/outofhome/resources\\_kinship/working\\_together.cfm](https://www.childwelfare.gov/outofhome/resources_kinship/working_together.cfm)

#### Openness in Adoption: Building Relationships Between Adoptive and Birth Families

[https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f\\_openadopt.cfm](https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f_openadopt.cfm)

#### Openness in Adoption – From Secrecy and Stigma to Knowledge and Connections

[http://www.adoptioninstitute.org/publications/2012\\_03\\_OpennessInAdoption.pdf](http://www.adoptioninstitute.org/publications/2012_03_OpennessInAdoption.pdf)

#### Building a Positive Relationship with Birth Parents

<http://www.fosteringperspectives.org/fpv13n1/foster.htm>

#### Telling the Truth to your Adopted or Foster Child: Making

#### Sense of the Past, by Betsy Keefer and Jayne Schooler

*The Adoptee Search: Looking for the Missing Piece*, by Marilyn Schoettle

#### Mother for Another Mother, a personal story

<http://www.wifostercareandadoption.org/Portals/fcarc/Stories/motherforanother.pdf>

#### The Voice of a Parent Involved with the Child Welfare System

[http://www.fosteringperspectives.org/fp\\_v11n1/philneia.htm](http://www.fosteringperspectives.org/fp_v11n1/philneia.htm)

#### The Voice of a Child

[http://www.fosteringperspectives.org/fp\\_vol4no2/voice\\_of\\_a\\_child.htm](http://www.fosteringperspectives.org/fp_vol4no2/voice_of_a_child.htm)

#### Fostering Across Wisconsin, Vol. 6, No. 4 Fall, 2011

<http://wifostercareandadoption.org/Portals/fcarc/FAW%20Newsletters/vol6no4.pdf>

#### Child Welfare Information Gateway: Searching for Birth Relatives

[https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f\\_search.pdf](https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f_search.pdf)

#### Resource Parents Partnering with Birth Parents to Benefit Children

[http://www.ifapa.org/pdf\\_docs/resourceparentspartneringwithbirthparents.pdf](http://www.ifapa.org/pdf_docs/resourceparentspartneringwithbirthparents.pdf)

<http://www.adoption.com/>  
<http://openadoption.com/>  
<http://www.adoptionopen.com/>  
<http://www.openadoption.org/>  
<http://www.iheartadoption.org/>



have been given “permission” to accept their role as a child in their foster/adoptive family. As a result, you may see reduced confusion associated with divided loyalty issues, which are often a barrier for children trying to make progress in the areas of child development, learning, and well-being while in their foster/adoptive home.

By no means is shared parenting an easy task in all situations; however, there are definitely many benefits to working with birth families that include:

- Providing reassurance for birth families that foster/adoptive families are providing a safe, nurturing, and stable environment for their child while they are in out-of-home care
- Allowing foster/adoptive families to learn about the challenges faced by birth families and perhaps resulting in greater feelings of understanding and empathy
- Reducing conflicts with birth parents over various issues
- Maintaining continuing connections for a child
- Assisting with smoother visitation/continued contact with the result of accepting and supporting more successful permanency outcomes for children
- Honoring and promoting respect of a child’s past connections to important individuals
- Helping children face family realities rather than allowing them to fantasize about the unknown

- Assisting with identity issues
- Easing worries and promoting the exchange of information between all parties

Shared parenting can mean that birth parents learn to model and enhance their own parenting with the help of foster/adoptive parents. In addition, birth parents can sometimes offer foster/adoptive parents valuable information about their child to help foster/adoptive parents effectively meet the child’s specific needs.

Observing the long list of benefits to working with birth parents—with the most important being how it could positively impact our children in more than one way—how could we not consider giving shared parenting a try? Working with birth parents can create a bridge and lifelong connections between the families by opening lines of communication that sometimes remain open beyond reunification or adoption. Believe it or not—not only can foster/adoptive families become a support system for birth families, birth families can become a support system for foster/adoptive families, too!

For more information and ideas regarding working with birth parents or shared parenting, please visit our website [www.wiadopt.org](http://www.wiadopt.org) or contact one of our Resource Specialists.







## Home to Stay: Our Best Journey

*Our thanks to parents Lori and Daniel O'Brien, who wrote their story for this issue of Partners.*

**We never meant to get into foster care or adoption, but it turns out we were meant for it. When our daughter was in high school she had a friend who needed a safe place to live. Her friend was 14 and having a lot of problems at home. We agreed to take her in for as long as she needed without batting an eye. We never adopted her, but she still considers us Mom and Dad. She now has kids of her own who consider us their grandparents.**

After she moved out of our home we could have easily been done. It was our kids who wanted us to keep doing foster care. They said they wanted to help sibling groups because it broke their hearts to think about being forced away from each other. We never went into foster care with the intent to adopt; we really wanted to help the bruised, broken kids grow into beautiful flowers, while their bruised, broken parents got the chance to heal.

As fate would have it, we would end up adopting 10 children from foster care who would melt into our family of three biological children and one nephew who we raised. The oldest child we adopted was 16 and the youngest was two. The first child we adopted came to us as a foster care placement at the age of 13; we adopted him when he was 16 and he is now 30. For us, there was no question; we would be his forever family if we were needed.

I know a lot of people are hesitant to accept placement of older children. I have to say that, for our family, the biggest challenges were typical teenage emotions and helping our son gain independence. It can be harder for caregivers who work with older foster and adopted youth, because you only have so much time to help before they become an adult. Many of these teens have been hurt, wounded, damaged; all of this can lead to them having trust issues and cause them to be very angry. It is important to remember that, for older youth, their hurts can be bigger and deeper. Raising any teenager is not always fun. It helped us to remember that no matter who that child is or where they came from you must take them where they are at.

The positives, however, outweigh the challenges. Another one of our sons was adopted a week before his fifteenth birthday. Seeing the relief on his face and hearing him say, "This means I'll be here forever, and you will never send me away," made any struggle we had gaining his trust worth it. He had held on to so many unspoken fears that we wouldn't want him because he was a teen. We bought him a dog tag necklace with his adoption date on it and, even two years later, he cherishes it.

In a more general sense, we have found that older children have a better understanding of what is going on. We can explain things and talk to them. They have also seemed to "heal" quicker. Daniel and I believe the key to our success has been, no matter if a child comes to you for a day or for forever, you need to accept them for who they are and what they bring to your family. All kids can do wrong things for right reasons. It helps to be willing to ask questions and not jump the gun. For us, we also have a foundation in God which keeps us close and grounded.

When a new placement comes to us, we have a bonfire, talk about the child's pains, write them down on paper, and then burn the paper, giving the pains to God. Many kids have shared with us that this has helped them replace the hurts and pains and instead use their heart as a treasure box where they can keep happy memories. We try to help them walk through forgiveness and encourage them that key to hope is

forgiving. As parents, we don't allow ourselves to get bitter or hardened. You can get *bitter* or *better*; it's the matter of one letter. We believe that, with love, patience, faith, and understanding, healing comes. This journey [of foster care and adoption] has been our best journey; remember: enjoy the journey.

After our last adoption in 2011 we were contacted by the Coalition about receiving some personalized backpacks for all of our children. A few months later, we had a visit with a friendly, knowledgeable staff member. It was neat and the kids thought it was great. Our 16-year-old still sleeps with the blanket that came in her backpack. The personalization of the initials and goodies inside really made the kids feel special. They all named their stuffed animals and, to my surprise, even the teens thought it was great. The visit was very helpful and made us aware of the resources available to us.

Even though we are pretty experienced at this, we can always use training and resources. Since our *Home to Stay*™ visit the Coalition has been a great place for us to go. Last spring, they offered a training series called *Our Home Our Family* that we attended. My husband and I left thinking this should be mandatory for all foster parents. It really helped us realize that we were not alone and opened up the window to help normalize some of the issues our family was having. We thought it was very beneficial, and we got to meet new people. We didn't feel so alone in having a forever family in a non-traditional way. We are now really good friends with one of the other couples we met while attending *Our Home Our Family*.

Foster care and adoption are not always easy; you can't think it's always going to go smoothly. You have to go in with realistic expectations. Warm fuzzies come from watching them grow, not always from the child. You should know that whatever you pour into them is helping, planting a seed that will grow with time.

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**Being a parent is a lifetime commitment. Our goal is to keep sibling groups together when possible. Your family grows even more than who is in your house. Acknowledge and respect family ties. Kids come with so much damage, hurt, pain, and anger. It's important to help them forgive and treasure at least one memory from the past.**

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feelings. But not having the conversation makes it even more difficult for your child, because they will have to cope with those fears and feelings without your help and support.


- People who have already searched are often happy to talk with others about what the journey was like for them, regardless of the outcome. They can also reinforce the idea that searching is only initiated after much thought. Your local Post Adoption Resource Center, or the Foster Care and Adoption Resource Center, might have some ideas about people you can contact.
- It can be helpful to join a support group. Other adoptive parents may have some ideas, advice and support as you go down this path with your child.

Another discussion to have with your child is about the ethical and safety aspects of searching. With the resources available on the Internet, including social media tools such as Facebook, it's easier than ever before to look for someone. You might talk with your child about respecting privacy and how anything posted on a social media site is really not private, regardless of the settings you've chosen. There's also a safety concern, because people are not always honest on the Internet and people are not always who they claim to be. Posting photos can also bring up safety issues because some

photos taken with smart phones can have an embedded "geotag" that gives the latitude and longitude of the location where the photo was taken.

It's healthy and natural for children, teens, and young adults who were adopted to want to make connections with their past. It's a normal part of forming an identity. You can help your child by acknowledging the importance of knowing about personal history, by sharing any birth family information you have in an age-appropriate way, and by encouraging open communication about adoption, birth parents, and the desire to search.



  
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**Family of websites:**  
 coalitionforcyf.org  
 wiadopt.org  
 wifostercareandadoption.org  
 wiadoptioninfocenter.org

An umbrella of services over foster care and adoption; information and referral; recruitment; training, education and support for families and professionals.



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