

Adult Birth Mothers Who Made Open Infant Adoption Placements after Adolescent Unplanned Pregnancy

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ABSTRACT

Objective: To summarize birth mothers' descriptions of how their adolescent or young adult unplanned pregnancies and decision for open infant adoption placement influenced their lives.

Design: Naturalistic inquiry using unstructured interviews.

Setting & Methods: One to 2-hour telephone interviews with participants in their home settings were recorded and transcribed. Deidentified transcripts were analyzed for qualitative content themes.

Participants: Fifteen women who had experienced unplanned adolescent or young adult pregnancy and relinquished their infants through open adoption were interviewed. Birth mothers who had been members of an agency support group were identified by an agency representative as having been typical of open adoption and were purposively recruited for study participation.

Results: Participants described the open adoption decision as "one of the most difficult but best" choices of their lives. Themes were summarized using the acronym AFRESH: A—adoption accomplishments, F—fresh start, R—relationship changes, E—emotions, S—support, H—healing. Findings indicated that benefits of open adoption outweighed challenges of pregnancy, birth, and emotional transitions. Birth children were perceived as thriving with adoptive families who were cherished like extended family. Birth mothers perceived themselves as being better people with better lives than before the unintended pregnancy. Growth with improved life direction was seen as a result of personal maturation from the experience.

Conclusions: Open adoption is reinforced as a positive resolution of adolescent unintended pregnancy. Birth mothers believed teens who feel "stuck" with a pregnancy should consider open adoption; nurses should provide support and uphold the process.

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Unintended pregnancy leads to unwanted or mistimed births. Heat of the moment, extended time alone with a partner, impulsivity, substance use that alters judgment, partner pressure, violence, or lack of contraception can be precursors of unintended pregnancy. About one half of the 6.7 million pregnancies in the United States are unintended, with 82% of adolescent pregnancies falling into this group (Finer & Zolna, 2011; Alan Guttmacher Institute, 2006, 2012). Worldwide levels of unintended pregnancy are estimated to be 41% (Singh, Sedgh, & Hussin, 2010). The United States has experienced a significant decline in adolescent births, and the current rate is at a historic low not seen since 1946 (Hamilton & Ventura, 2012; Hamilton, Martin, & Ventura, 2012). Still, there continues to be a need for intervention

with adolescents due to the increased public and private cost of unplanned compared to planned pregnancy.

Open adoption is one pregnancy resolution option that has gained support in the United States (Castle, 2012; Farr, Grant-Marsney, Musante, Grotevant, & Wrobel, 2014; Grotevant & McRoy, 1998; Siegel & Smith, 2012). An adoption is open when a birth mother has contact with the adoptive family and birth child. She does not parent the child. Although birth and adoption placement can have a vast impact on the birth mother's life, birth mothers who resolve their unintended pregnancy through the choice of open adoption are understudied; little is known about the influences of these events on their

lives (Cortes, 2012). This study was undertaken to learn about adult birth mother perceptions of their open adoptions that occurred during adolescence. Birth mothers in this study had open adoptions with initial and continuing contact with their birth child and the child's adoptive family. Experiences of birth mothers of open adoption differ from those who choose closed adoption. The study explored views of birth mothers themselves about their own choice of open adoption and its effect on their lives subsequent to their open adoption decision.

Background Literature

The teenage birth rate in the United States is the highest in the developed world and about 4 times that of the average in the European Union (Innocenti Report Card, 2001; Lawlor, 2004). The birth rate for teenagers has dropped to 31.3 per 1,000 births in 2011 (Martin et al., 2013). Even with the recent rate decline, the United States has the highest adolescent pregnancy and birth rate among comparable industrialized nations (Martin et al., 2010). Because the adolescent birth rate is so high, having several options for parenting babies may offer teens choices that yield positive quality-of-life outcomes.

Adoption, as one of those options, has undergone fundamental shifts, with a trend toward greater openness (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2003). Research evidence increasingly supports openness between members of the adoption triad: birth family, adoptive family, and child (Berge, Mendenhall, Wrobel, Grotevant, & McRoy, 2006; Siegel & Smith, 2012; Wolfgram, 2008). When openness is not established at the time of adoption, opening a once-closed adoption does not always yield favorable results (MacDonald & McSherry, 2011).

Many believe that openness in the choice of adoptive parents eases the adoption process for the birth mother (Ge et al., 2008; Grotevant & McRoy, 1998; Larsen, 2008). There may be a grief or mourning experience (Askren & Bloom, 1999; Gritter, 2000; Smith, 2007), yet the adoption process can take place without regret for the decision. Birth mother satisfaction is possible with ongoing contact of members in the adoption triad (Castle, 2012).

The influence of adoption placement, and particularly open adoption placement, on the birth mother's own life has not been well reported

After open adoption, birth mothers perceived themselves as being better people with better lives than before the unintended pregnancy.

in literature. The few studies of open adoption that exist document a variety of favorable outcomes (Castle, 2012; Ge et al., 2008; Grotevant & McRoy, 1998), including greater satisfaction with the adoption process as well as significantly improved postplacement adjustment compared with closed adoption. Improved adjustment is important for the birth mother's health, well-being, relationships, future quality of life, and indirectly, for the birth child. The purpose of this study was to learn how the process of open adoption influenced and shaped birth mothers' lives in the years after their infant's birth.

Methods

The study was granted Human Subjects Approval by the associated academic Institutional Review Board and given agency assent. This naturalistic qualitative study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) was designed to deepen understanding of birth mothers' experiences subsequent to unintended pregnancy and open adoption placement in relationship to how the process of open adoption influenced and shaped their lives. Naturalistic inquiry is suitable when little is known about a population as is the case in this investigation.

Purposive sampling was used to identify potential participants. Fifteen adult birth mothers who had participated in an unintended pregnancy support group at an agency during their perinatal period were recruited for interviews. The agency's purpose was to support girls and women experiencing crisis and unplanned pregnancy, supporting pregnancy and parenting, or pregnancy and adoption placement.

Eligible birth mothers were adolescents at the time of pregnancy and birth, lived in the United States, and spoke English. Thirteen women of the sample had been adolescents at the time of giving birth. Two participants were in their early twenties when they gave birth but were included in the sample for comparison of their experiences. The written consent form and gift card given as thanks were mailed to participants. All contact information and recordings of verbalized study consent were separated and kept in a locked file apart from transcripts and interview tapes.

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