

Evolving Relationships and Contact in Adoptions

2013 Rudd Adoption Conference
April 12, 2013

9-10:15 a.m.

U. Mass Amherst Department of Psychology

Chair: Ruth G. McRoy, Ph.D.

Panelists: Erin Bigelow, Kathleen Cooley, Marvin Drake, Elizabeth Drake, & Phyllis Shepard

Overview of Presentation

- Brief review of the literature on birthparent decision making and post-placement experiences
- Birthparent/Adoptive Parent Panel Presentation
 - Erin Bigelow
 - Kathleen Cooley
 - Marvin Drake
 - Elizabeth Drake
 - Phyllis Shepard
- Questions/Discussion
- Concluding Remarks

It's true. What will I do?



Unplanned Pregnancy:

- Decision making may be related to the following:
 - Age at time of conception
 - Relationship
 - Influences of family, church, community, school, friends
 - Future plans
- Options: abortion, parent or place for adoption
 - Influenced by parental pressure, family, relationship with birth father



Unplanned Pregnancy

- Emotional turmoil: regret, guilt, fear of others finding out; loss of relationship; fear of rejection
- In the past, due to secrecy: Birthmothers often sent to live in maternity home or with relatives



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Decision: Adoption



After Placement

- Many birth mothers advised to return home, forget about the baby, and live “happily ever after.”
- Birth fathers were often viewed as “shadowy figures” (Mason, 1995).
- Only limited studies exist on outcomes for birth fathers-most of research is on adoptive families , adopted children, and birth mothers

Birth Fathers and Their Adoption Experiences (Clapton, 2007)

- Selected findings from interviews with 30 birth fathers between 1996-1999.
 - Chief reason for placement: Parental pressure
 - Like birth mothers, birth fathers also often experience grief

Issues for Birth Fathers (Clapton & Coles, 2004)

- Often excluded from process of decision making
- Guilt-abandoned birth mother
- Loss or denial of existence of child
- Identity as birth father
- Emotional turmoil
- Feelings of emasculation or disempowerment
- Frequent loss of relationship with birth mother
- Parental pressure, guilt, depression; always on mind
- Rejection by family, friends
- Delayed acceptance of responsibility
- Over time—want to tell placed child their side of story
 - Missing part of self

Over time, birth fathers

- Remain conflict ridden (Deykin, Patti & Ryan, 1988)
- “Invisible Men of Adoption” (Gary Coles)
- Experience loss of child, parenting role, romantic relationship (Neil, 2006)
- Experience disenfranchised grief
- Think back on the experience when they become parents later in life



Birth Mothers

- Viewed as primary client
- Gatekeepers of information
- Devalued roles
- Stigma
- Ongoing loss
- Regret

Evolving Questions and Concerns

- **Questions:** Is my child alive? Does she know she's adopted? Does he hate me? Is she being well cared for? Am I so terrible that I do not deserve answers to these questions? Does my adult child wish to make contact with me? Why am I not allowed to thank the adoptive parents? What will happen if I find the child I placed? Should I tell my spouse that I placed a child for adoption years ago? What will he/she think about me? Should I tell our children they have another brother or sister that I could not parent at the time?

Evolving Relationships: Panel Presentation

Erin Bigelow

Kathleen Cooley

Marvin Drake

Elizabeth Drake

Phyllis Shephard

Questions for Panelists

- Erin Bigelow
- Kathleen Cooley
- Marvin Drake
- Elizabeth Drake
- Phyllis Shepard

Implications for Research and Practice

- Need more studies on outcomes for birth fathers as well as birth mothers over time
- Counselors/therapists need to be aware of the impact of placing a child for adoption as well as the impact of evolving relationships and varying types of contact for birth and adoptive family members.



Thanks to the Panelists!!!

- Thanks for sharing your stories!