

ACEs in Oregon: Children Need Our Help The Adverse Childhood Experiences Study

“The more types of ACEs events -- physical abuse, an alcoholic father, an abused mother, etc -- the higher the risk of heart disease, depression, diabetes, obesity, being violent or experiencing violence. Got an ACE score of 4 or more? Your risk of heart disease increases 200%. Your risk of suicide increases 1200%.”

**Sept. 2014; ACE Study, Child trauma - Chronic disease, Neurobiology; Jane Ellen Stevens*

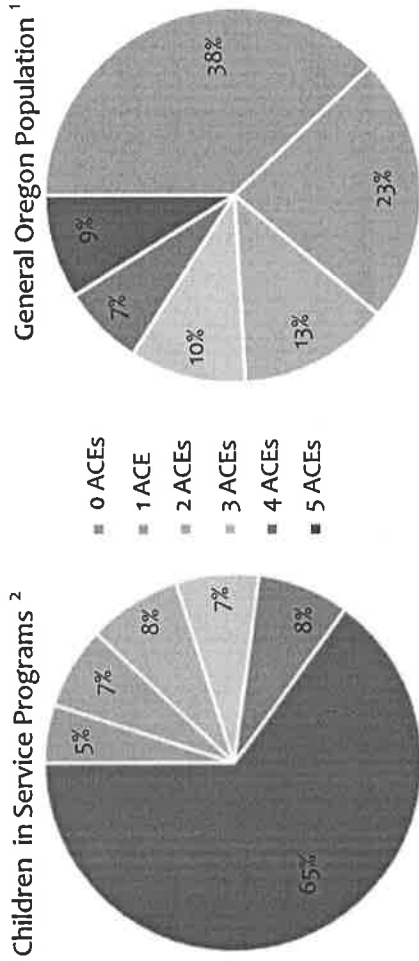
In 2014 the provider members of the Oregon Alliance of Children’s Programs researched the ACE scores of children in its programs. Nearly 800 surveys, for children and youth 3-25 years of age, were submitted by community shelters, services, and treatment programs, these are the results:

- Children of color represent 36% of the respondents
- Males 63% | Females 36%

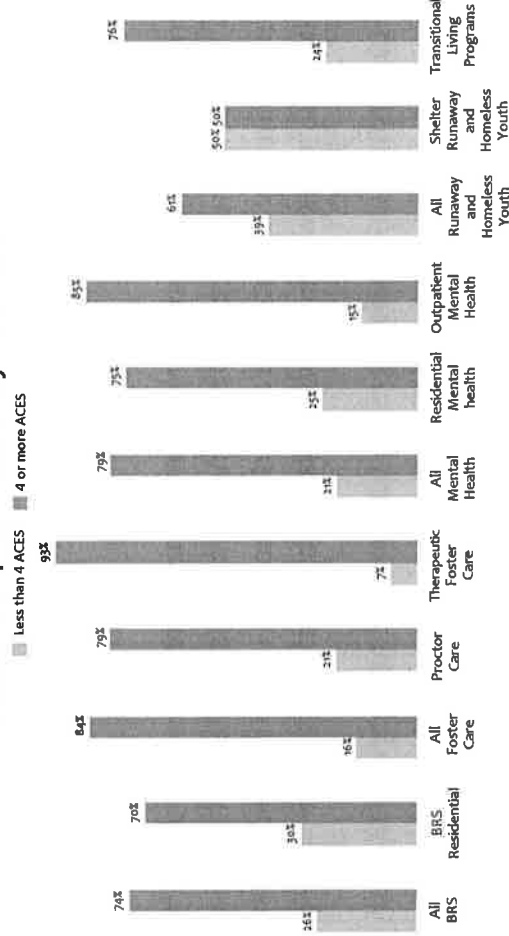
Invest for Success

An investment in children today means they will not become the chronically ill adults with complex, expensive needs, tomorrow. Together we can help children achieve health, graduation, and the ability to become working adults who will raise their own healthy families.

ACE Trauma level of children in community programs and services, compared to Oregon’s general public:



ACEs of 4 or more by Service



What These Children Need Now
Support for evidence-based programs and services that address or prevent trauma for all school aged children.
This commitment is necessary to achieve health care transformation and to reach Oregon’s education goals.



For more information, contact:

Janet Arenz, OACP Executive Director

503-399-9076

Doug Riggs, NGrC President

503-597-3866

¹ 2011 Oregon Health Authority study <http://public.health.oregon.gov/HealthyPeopleFamilies/DataReports/Documents/OregonACEsReport.pdf>

² 2014 Oregon Alliance of Children’s Programs Study

The Impact of ACEs

BEHAVIOR ISSUES¹

- Struggle with self-regulation, lack impulse control
- Lack ability to think through consequences before acting
- Unpredictable, oppositional, volatile and extreme
- React defensively and aggressively
- “Spacey,” detached, distant or out of touch with reality
- Engage in high-risk behaviors (self-harm, unsafe sexual practices, excessive risk-taking, illegal activities, alcohol and substance abuse, assault, running away, prostitution)

LEARNING DIFFICULTIES¹

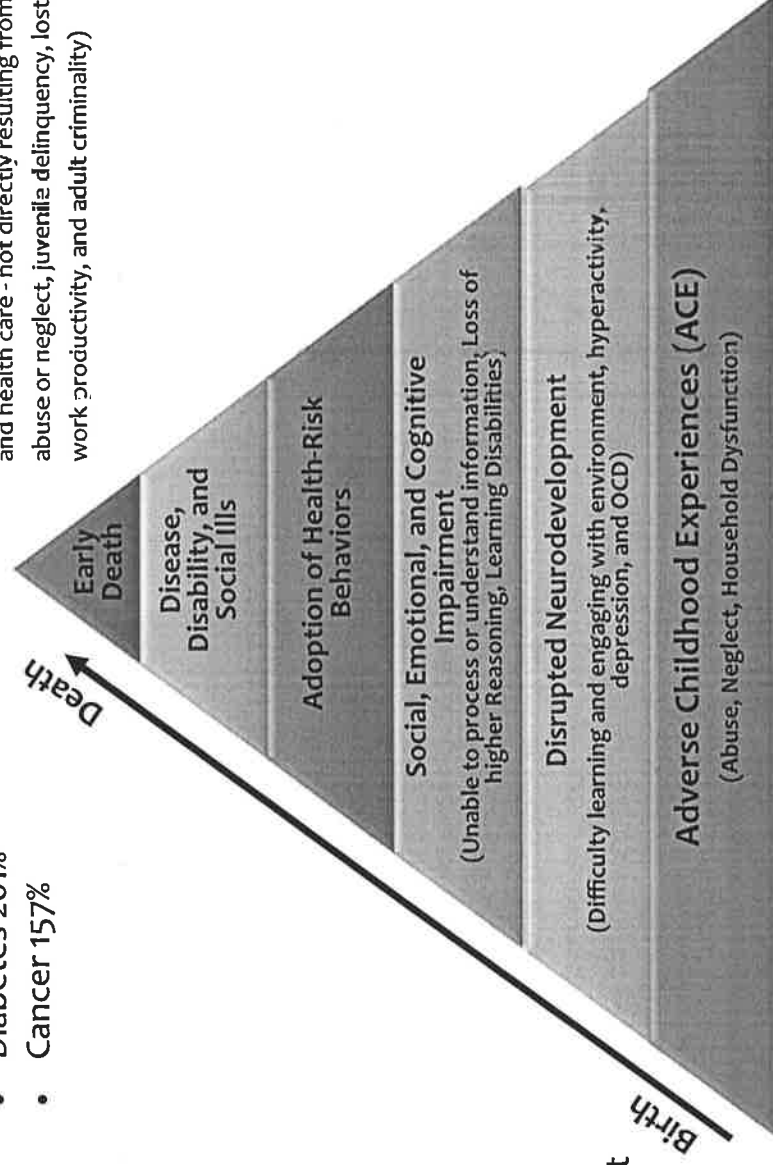
- Problems thinking clearly, reasoning or problem-solving
- Hard to acquire new skills or take in new information
- Struggle with sustaining attention
- Show deficits in language development
- Learning difficulties that may require support in the academic environment
- Unable to plan ahead, anticipate the future

HEALTH ISSUES²

- Scores of 4+ Increase Odds of Chronic Disease and Early Death
- Suicide 1200%
 - COPD (lung) 399%
 - Kidney Disease 263%
 - Arthritis 236%
 - Heart Attack 232%
 - Asthma 231%
 - Stroke 218%
 - Diabetes 201%
 - Cancer 157%

ECONOMIC IMPACT¹

- Estimated conservative annual cost to America—\$124 billion
- Immediate Direct Costs of \$91.8 billion (includes hospitalization, chronic health problems, mental health costs, costs incurred by the child welfare system, law enforcement, and costs of the judicial system)
- Indirect Costs of \$29.6 billion (Includes special education, mental health and health care - not directly resulting from abuse or neglect, juvenile delinquency, lost work productivity, and adult criminality)



Mechanisms by which adverse childhood experiences influence health and well-being throughout a lifespan

¹Center for Disease Control and Prevention, www.vetoviolence.cdc.gov, 2016 resource center infographic.

²October 2013 ACEs TOO HIGH Newsletter Revised August, 2016

Lois A. Day, Administrator
Office of Safety & Permanency for Children

Authorized Signature

Number: CW-IM-10-021

Issue Date: 11/15/2010

Topic: Adoptions

Subject: Voluntary Placement of Newborns with Private Adoption Agencies

Applies to (check all that apply):

- | | |
|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> All DHS employees | <input type="checkbox"/> County Mental Health Directors |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Area Agencies on Aging | <input type="checkbox"/> Health Services |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Children, Adults and Families | <input type="checkbox"/> Seniors and People with Disabilities |
| <input type="checkbox"/> County DD Program Managers | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Other (please specify): Child Welfare |

Message: This IM is intended to clarify practice regarding voluntary placement of newborns directly with licensed, private adoption agencies by birth parents when there are known protective services concerns for the infant. This information will address roles and responsibilities of Department Child Protective Services (CPS) caseworkers and private adoption agency staff in the decision making processes that surround voluntary adoption, as well as the family dynamics and circumstances necessary in applicable cases.

The process is intended to effectively and efficiently assist birth parents managing their child's safety and planning for their child's permanency through adoption and, in doing so, promote openness in adoptions and prevent the conflict and stress that accompanies case conclusions other than family preservation or reunification. Allowing voluntary placement of newborns for private adoption consequently empowers parents to make decisions for their baby and is in the best interest of the child.

Department Child Protective Services caseworkers will be expected comply with all policy expectations of I-AB.4 CPS Assessment, including ICWA requirements. In addition, caseworkers shall take the following actions:

- Determine Case Eligibility:
 1. Birth parents who have legal custody of a child 18 months of age or younger and one of the following applies:
 - a) The birth parent has begun the adoption process with a private, licensed adoption agency prior to being contacted by CPS and expresses a desire to CPS to continue the adoption process.

- b) The birth parent, after being contacted by CPS, expresses a desire to explore adoption for their child and the least intrusive plan to manage the child's safety would require out of home placement.
- 2. When safety can be managed through placement pending finalization of the adoption.
- 3. Prior to establishment of wardship.
- 4. Approval required from the local child welfare program manager.

- Obtain Releases of Information: When a birth parent informs the Department that they have begun the adoption process, would like to begin the adoption process or would like information about the adoption process, the Department agrees to obtain releases of information.

- Immediately contact the identified adoption agency.

- Assure child safety in the absence of filing a petition and prior to establishing wardship. ***When filing a petition is necessary to assure child safety, a petition will be filed.***

- Arrange for the birth parents to sign consents releasing temporary custody to the adoption agency, if this has not been done.

- Conclude child welfare legal involvement when birth parents:
 - Sign consents giving temporary custody to the adoption agency and the agency makes the private placement. In these cases, there must be a previously identified adoptive family.
 - Allow the newborn to remain hospitalized or be placed temporarily with relatives, kith or kin, while the birth parents make arrangements with the adoption agency to place the child for adoption. In these cases, there must be no dependency petition.

Generally, CPS can expect private adoption agencies to do the following:

- Provide information to the Department and the birth parents about the process for the specific family.
- Arrange for open post-adoptive relationships between the mother, father and their child appropriate.
- Notify the Department when a placement disrupts.

If you have any questions about this information, contact:

Contact(s):	Carla Crane, Assistant Manager, Adoptions Program Gail Schelle, Assistant Manager Adoptions Program		
Phone:	503-945-5998	Fax:	503-945-6633
	503-945-5997		
E-mail:	Carla.Crane@state.or.us Gail.A.Schelle@state.or.us		

Collaborative Relationship Between DHS and Open Adoption & Family Services

I. Responding to Child Safety:

- A. The DHS Hotline responds to public calls of child abuse/neglect. For each call CPS receives, a screening process begins. DHS makes a determination whether or not to conduct an assessment of the family and a report is written.
- B. In many cases, following the screening a CPS caseworker will conduct a safety assessment. After an assessment is completed, CPS and law enforcement staff decides (with family assistance, if possible) if the child can safely remain at home. DHS has the authority to remove a child from the home if the child is in immediate danger of abuse.
- C. DHS must request a shelter hearing within 24 hours when a child has been removed from the care of their parent and placed in protective custody. A subsequent hearing is held to consider the facts of the child abuse assessment. Additional hearings are held if the court determines a child needs its protection.

2. Collaboration Process:

- A. If the mom plans an adoption with Open Adoption & Family Serves (OA&FS) at birth, prior to DHS establishing wardship, OA&FS would complete the adoption according to our protocol.
- B. If she plans an adoption with OA&FS after DHS establishes wardship the DHS caseworker, the birthmom, the OA&FS representative and the adoptive parents would go before a judge. The wardship would be transferred to OA&FS, the birthparent signs the consents and OA&FS places the child with the adoptive family.
- C. DHS would only search for a suitable relative to adopt the child, if DHS has custody of the child. If the mom wants to make (or has made) a reasonable adoption plan prior to wardship, the relative rule doesn't apply. Even after wardship, the relative rule doesn't apply if the mom is actively engaged in a reasonable adoption plan and a judge transfers the wardship from DHS to OA&FS.

3. DHS' Collaborative Relationship with OA&FS (sample scenarios):

- A. First time pregnancy for mom (no prior DHS involvement). Due to risk factors during pregnancy: drug or alcohol use, homelessness, domestic violence, mental illness or baby tests positive for drugs at birth, DHS is notified by a mandatory reporter. If birthmom has contacted us and is actively planning an adoption, allow her to work with us.
- B. Mom has had previous involvement with DHS regarding older children and DHS is aware of her current pregnancy. If during the CPS assessment a safety plan is put in place and mom wants to plan an adoption through us, please allow it. At this point the baby is either in the hospital or with a safe relative who is not interested in adopting.
- C. Mom has given birth and taken the baby home. The Healthy Families worker is concerned about her ability to care for the child and contacts DHS. If the child is under the age of 1.5 years, and the mom would like to plan an adoption with us, please allow her to do so.

Relative Rule clarification, Nov. 2013

Although the memo specifically refers to voluntary placement, it refers to voluntary placement with the adoption agency, not DHS. 413-070-0069 Responsibilities to Identify Relatives and Persons with a Caregiver Relationship, are both referring to voluntary placement and voluntary custody with **DHS**. **Since the voluntary placement is with the adoption agency, our rules do not apply.**

Maurita Johnson
Deputy Child Welfare Director
503-947-1135

WHAT IS OPEN ADOPTION?



OAE&FS adoptee Dylan with birthmother Kim.

We're here to help you.

Contact us for confidential counseling, any time, day or night. Open Adoption & Family Services is a nonprofit open adoption agency licensed in Oregon and Washington.

Talk to a counselor now.

Call 1-800-772-1115 Anytime

Text "open" to 971-266-0924

Online Contact Form: openadopt.org

Para Español 1-800-985-6763

Portland
5200 SW Macadam Ave.
Suite 250
Portland, OR 97239
503-226-4870

Eugene
315 West 10th Ave.
Eugene, OR 97401
541-343-4825

Seattle
2815 Eastlake Ave. E.
Suite 160
Seattle, WA 98102
206-783-0442

OPEN ADOPTION & FAMILY SERVICES
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OPEN ADOPTION & FAMILY SERVICES
1-800-772-1115 OPENADOPT.ORG

This is your open adoption.

Through our progressive services you'll be empowered and supported.

- We'll provide a safe space for you to make the decision that feels best – one that reflects your beliefs and values.
- Regardless of the choice you make, we'll be there for you. You can call our counselors anytime, day or night.
- All of our services are free of charge to you. Financial assistance for pregnancy-related expenses is available.



OAE&FS adoptee Aven with birthparents James and Kati, and adoptive parents Eric and Heather, (r-l).

You will always be part of your child's life.

- Our adoptions are truly open. You form a natural, open adoption relationship with the adoptive family in which you feel at home: welcomed, honored and accepted.
- We'll provide you and the adoptive parents with the relationship-building tools and skills you need to realize your open adoption vision.
- You gain peace of mind about the well-being of your child through ongoing visits.
- Your child will grow up knowing who you are, that you love them and that you chose their parents.



OAE&FS adoptee Finn with birthfather Chris, adoptive dad Brady, birthmother Shirene and adoptive dad Peter, (l-r).

"Everyone at OAE&FS has been very sensitive and understanding during this difficult time. I love the adoptive parents I chose more than I ever could have imagined. I'm glad they are together with my child and that I am a part of their lives. The openness is invaluable to me." — OAE&FS birthmother

Make your open adoption vision a reality.

Learn about your options.

- At OA&FS you'll be treated with dignity and respect as you explore all of your options. We're here to listen and support you.
- If your choice is adoption, we'll help you plan an open adoption that honors your hopes and dreams.

Choose the parents.

- You're the most qualified person to choose adoptive parents for your child.
- You choose from 65-85 diverse families who genuinely want an extended family relationship with you. We welcome families that are straight, gay, married and single.
- You review the families' photo book and home study, which is a report about their beliefs, parenting values and lifestyle.

Build a relationship.

- You meet and form a friendship with the family. We're there to help you feel comfortable and get to know one another.
- You and the adoptive parents create a legally enforceable contract for ongoing visits. All of the adoptive families we work with want a lifelong relationship with you. You get together much like an extended family.

Create lifelong connections.

- You will always have contact with your child, with an average of two to four visits per year.
- We provide you with ongoing relationship guidance and adoption support throughout your life.
- You'll also become an important part of our open adoption community, which is full of opportunities to connect with other birthparents through retreats, workshops and gatherings.

Katherine's story.



Katherine with newborn Fin.

"I was 17 and overwhelmed by the thought of caring for a child."



OASFS birthmother Katherine, (upper right), with birthfather Garrett, adoptive mom Joell, son Fin, brother Max and adoptive dad Hans, (l-r).

"When I met the adoptive parents we connected instantly. They have such open, loving hearts."

"My relationship with Fin's family is comfortable, rewarding and fun. They're so willing to share the joy of Fin's growth with me."



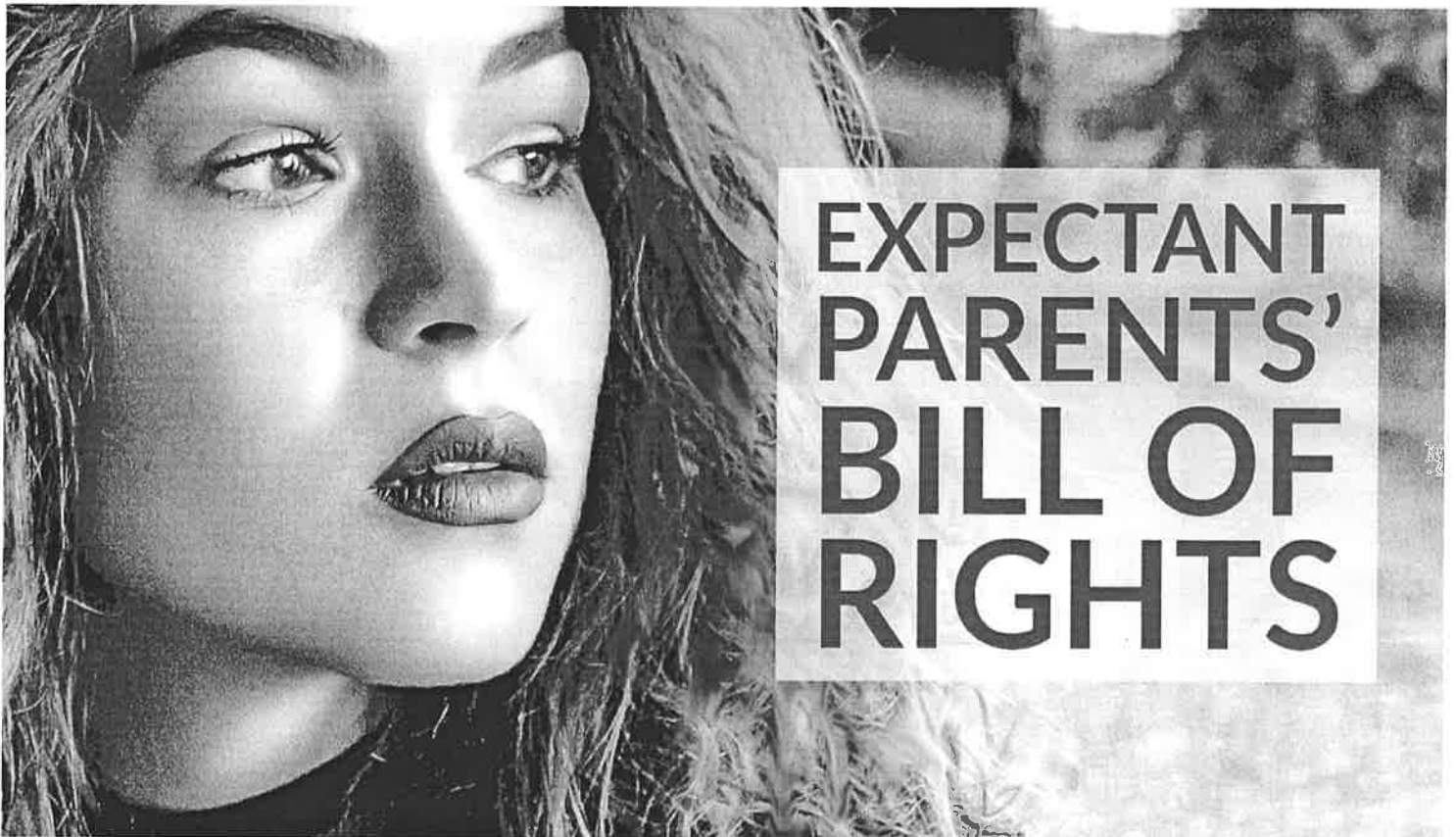
Katherine with 18-year-old Fin.

"Fin will always have a solid sense of who he is. I know he's happy, and that makes me happy."

Be
treated
with
respect,
compassion
and
acceptance.

Freely
explore
your
options
without
pressure
or judgment.

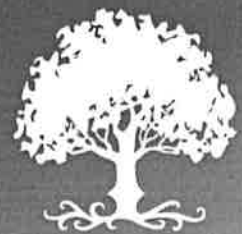
Receive
unbiased
pregnancy
options
counseling
from
qualified
counselors.



EXPECTANT PARENTS' BILL OF RIGHTS

Have access
to info
about all
of your
pregnancy
options.

Have your
choice
honored,
regardless
of what
it is.



OPEN ADOPTION
& FAMILY
SERVICES
1-800-772-1115
OPENADOPT.ORG



OPEN ADOPTION & FAMILY SERVICES

YOU WILL ALWAYS BE IMPORTANT IN YOUR CHILD'S LIFE.

At OA&FS you'll be treated with dignity and respect as you explore all of your options. We're here to listen and support you.

- **You're the most qualified person to choose adoptive parents for your child.** We have a large diverse pool of 65-85 carefully screened families, or you can come to us with an adoptive family you've already chosen.
- **You and the adoptive parents create a legally enforceable agreement for ongoing visits.** The average number of visits is three to four per year, and it often grows from there —much like extended family.
- **OA&FS adoptions are truly open.** Our adoptive parents genuinely want to build a friendship with you. You and the adoptive parents create a natural lifelong relationship that will meet your child's ongoing needs.
- **You'll connect with other birthparents.** Through retreats, workshops and gatherings in our open adoption community.
- **We'll be there for you.** We provide open adoption services to you throughout the life of your adoption — free of charge.



My oldest daughter was adopted by the greatest couple on earth. I had an amazing experience and felt heard and valued. I never felt like I lost her.

— OA&FS Birthmother

Make Your Open Adoption Vision a Reality.



Call 1-800-772-1115 Anytime



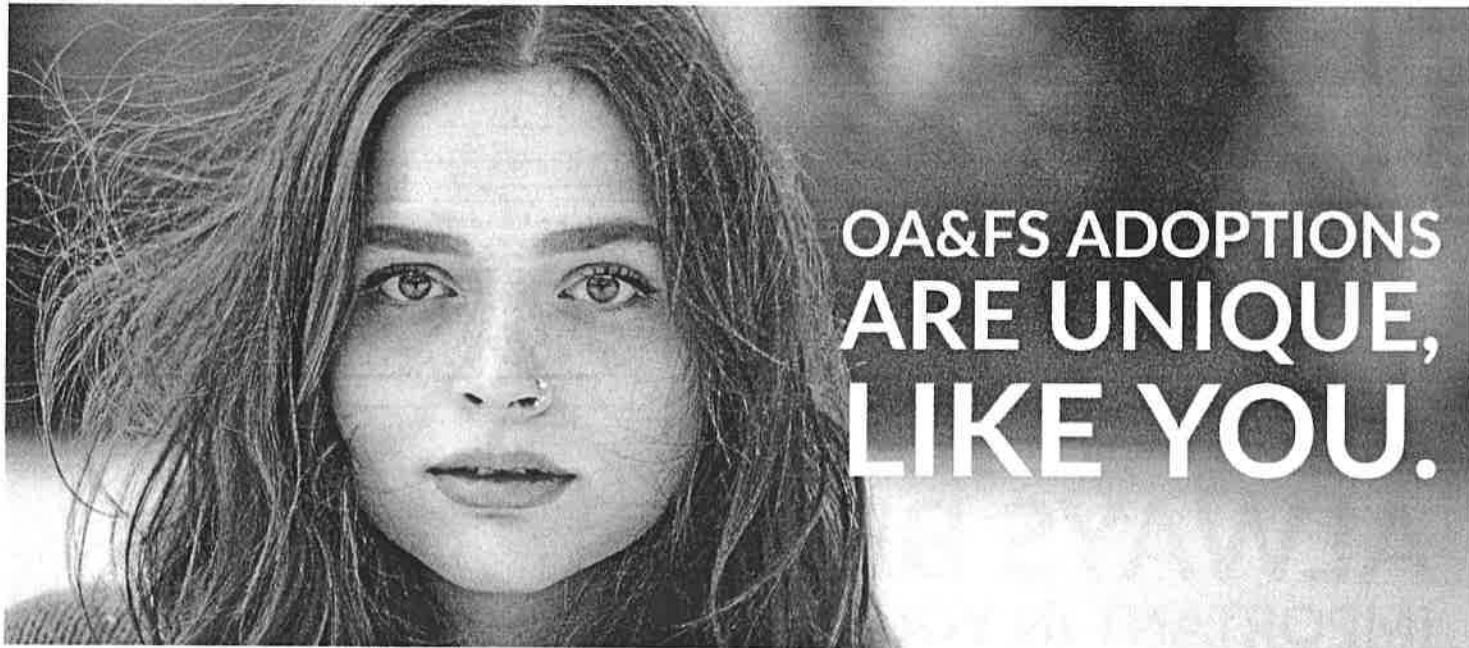
Text "open" to 971-266-0924



Online Contact Form: openadopt.org



Para Español 1-800-985-6763



OA&FS ADOPTIONS ARE UNIQUE, LIKE YOU.

“Open Adoption” means different things to different people. At OA&FS it means you’ll have a lifelong relationship with your child and the adoptive family. When comparing services offered by agencies, facilitators, and/or attorneys, you’ll want answers to these important questions:

	OA&FS	ATTORNEY	OTHER AGENCY		OA&FS	ATTORNEY	OTHER AGENCY		OA&FS	ATTORNEY	OTHER AGENCY
Am I the deciding voice in all the details of my adoption?	✓			Can I read the adoptive parents' homestudies?	✓			Will visits continue until the child is an adult?	✓		
Do I get free counseling and support for the life of my adoption?	✓			Does your pool include a selection of same sex couples and single parents as well as married couples?	✓			If I've already found an adoptive family, can you work with us?	✓		
Is pregnancy-related financial support available?	✓			Will there be a legally enforceable open adoption agreement that outlines number of ongoing visits?	✓			How many open adoptions with ongoing visits have you completed?	OVER 1,500		
Do the adoptive parents genuinely want a lifelong relationship with me that includes ongoing visits?	✓			What is the average number of visits per year?	3 TO 4			How long have you been providing fully open adoption services?	SINCE 1985		
Will I have a large pool of qualified families to choose from?	YES, 65-85			Can I visit my child and the adoptive family without agency supervision?	✓			Do you have Spanish-speaking Counselors and materials in Spanish?	✓		



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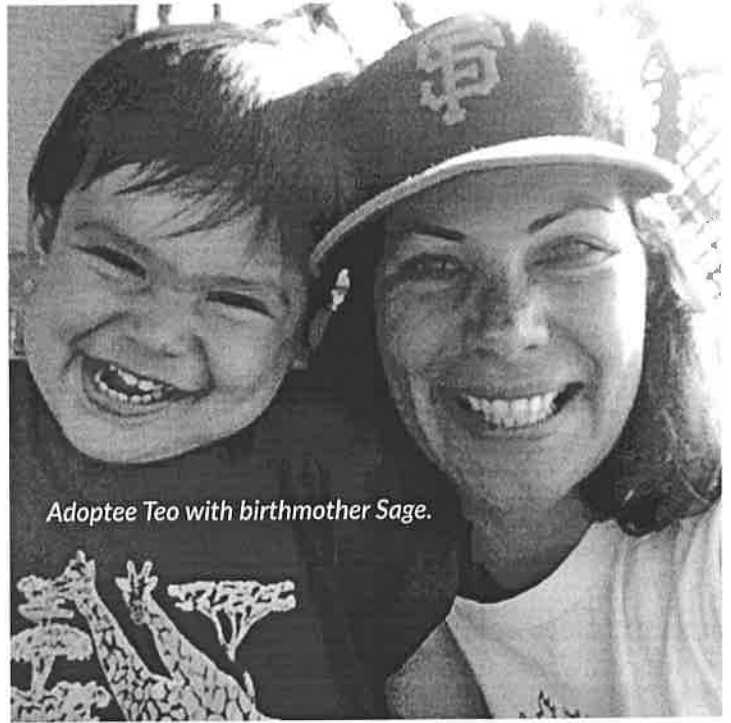
OPEN ADOPTION & FAMILY SERVICES

IN OPEN ADOPTION, EVERY VOICE IS HEARD.



Adoptee Fin with
Birthfather Garrett.

When my girlfriend found out she was pregnant, she had three choices - parenting, abortion or adoption. But I had two choices: to be involved or not be involved. I chose to be involved in Fin's life and it was the best decision I could have made!



Adoptee Teo with birthmother Sage.

Teo deserved to have a chance at a very safe and loving life, and open adoption was absolutely the best choice, especially because we would be able to know each other.



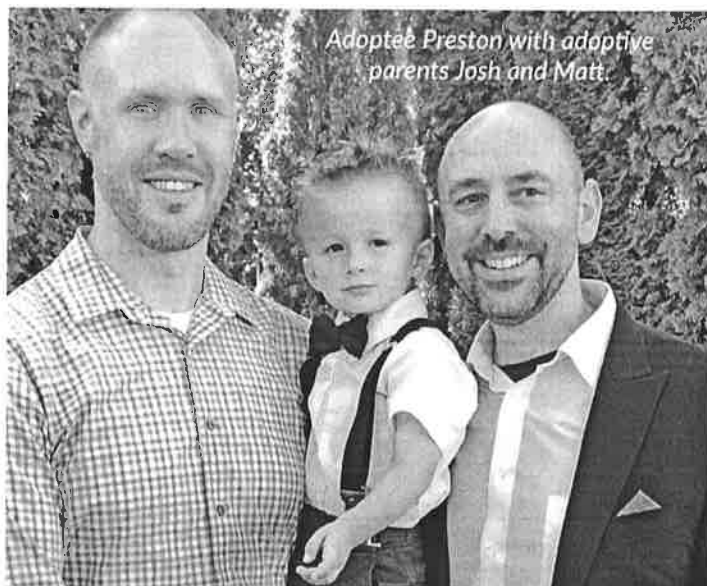
Adoptee Liam (center) with adoptive parents Paul and Tracey, birthmother Haley and birth sibling E.J. (l-r).

My relationship with Paul and Tracey is absolutely amazing. It's like having the best friends you could ask for.

IN OPEN ADOPTION, EVERYONE MATTERS.



Adoptee Brianna with Birthmother Melissa.



Adoptee Preston with adoptive parents Josh and Matt.

My birthparents are a huge part of my life. I visit them and we talk and they're great role models for me. I really respect what they've done and the choices they've made in their lives.

Every time we visit with birthparents Misty and Bryan we can see that they still care about Preston very much, and light up when they see him. They really did this from a place of love themselves, and that makes me feel good that they made the best choice for them.



Birthmother Taylor with her birth son.

Every year we grow closer as a family, and I am forever indebted to the adoptive parents for the constant love and support they have provided.



OPEN ADOPTION & FAMILY SERVICES
1-800-772-1115 **OPENADOPT.ORG**

TEXT "OPEN" TO 971-266-0924 (M-F 9A-5P PST). PARA ESPAÑOL 1-800-985-6763.

We're here to support you.

Contact us for confidential counseling any time, day or night. Open Adoption & Family Services is a non-profit open adoption agency licensed in Oregon and Washington.



Text "open" to 971-266-0924
or call 1-800-772-1115 any time.
Para Español 1-800-985-6763.
(Text answering available 9 am-5 pm PST M-F)

Scan this code with your smart phone to fill out an online inquiry form at www.openadoption.org/online-inquiry



Office locations:

Portland
5200 SW Macadam Ave., Suite 250
Portland, OR 97239
503-226-4870

Seattle
2815 Eastlake Ave. E, Suite 160
Seattle, WA 98102
206-782-0442

Eugene
315 West 10th Ave.
Eugene, OR 97401
541-343-4825

Fathers Matter. Being involved in your child's adoption.



Talk to a counselor now:
Text "open" to 971-266-0924
or call 1-800-772-1115 any time.

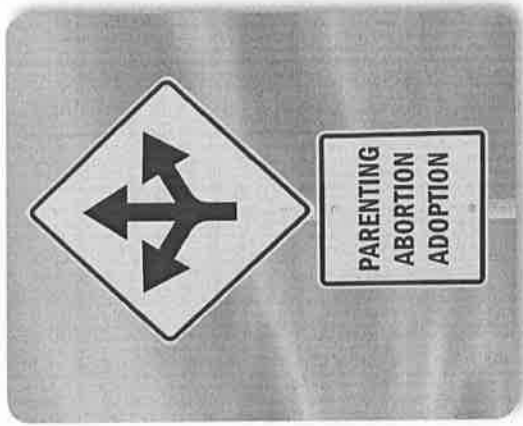


The first step: Options counseling for you.

Our confidential counseling is free of charge, and offers you and the expectant mother a safe place to explore all your options: parenting, abortion and adoption. We're here to listen and offer both of you compassion and resources.

We understand you may feel overwhelmed and unsure about where to go from here. At OA&FS, we value your involvement and are committed to creating a comfortable environment for you and the expectant mother. We also understand you may have differing views, and we are here to help you navigate challenging conversations.

We're a nonprofit, pro-choice agency not affiliated with any religion, and will treat you with dignity and respect.



“When we were facing an unplanned pregnancy my girlfriend had three choices: parenting abortion and adoption. I had two choices — to be involved or not involved.”

— Garrett, OA&FS Birthfather



**Birthers have
an important role
in their child's life.**

When facing an unplanned pregnancy, sometimes expectant fathers feel excluded from the process. At O&FS all services we offer to birthmothers are available to birthers.

We welcome and encourage birther participation in our open adoption program. Through our child-centered open adoptions, we'll help you form a lifelong relationship with your child and the adoptive family.



O&FS birther Kyle with adoptive parents Kate and Kerryann and birther Sky holding adopter Kyle. (1-1)

**Choosing open
adoption?
Here's how to
get involved.**



**Meet with a
counselor.**

You'll be treated with dignity and respect as you plan your adoption. You're welcome to meet with us individually or as a couple.



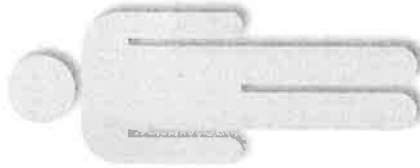
**Help choose
the adoptive
family.**

You choose from more than 80 families who genuinely want a relationship with you. You're provided extensive information and meet the family prior to an adoption plan taking place.



**You will always
be a part of
your child's life.**

Your child will grow up knowing you, and knowing that you love them.



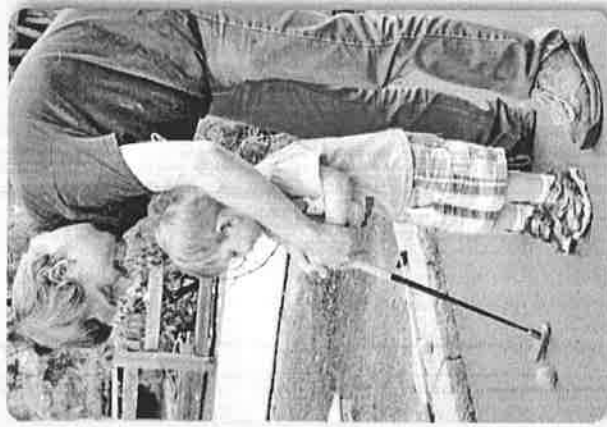
**Build a lifelong
relationship.**

We'll help you create a genuine relationship with the adoptive family that's much like extended family.



**Have ongoing visits
with your child and
their family.**

You will always have contact with your child. Your ongoing visits are guaranteed through a legally enforceable adoption agreement.



O&FS adopter Travis with birther Chris

**You can make
a big difference.**

"It has meant so much to have Andrew, our son's birther, involved. He participated in choosing us, so we felt an immediate connection to him. We were so lucky he wanted to stay in our lives. He and our son Devin have a relationship that's very special and unique. Andrew writes to him and visits. The friendship they have answers Devin's questions. It helps him understand himself. They're pals. As Devin grows, he looks more and more like Andrew. The relationship gives Devin a connection to his origins... This has been so valuable for all of us"

— Jan, Adoptive Mother

**Habla con un
consejero ahora.**

Llama al 1-800-985-6763 a cualquier hora.
Para inglés, llama al 1-800-772-1115.

Para aprender más sobre
los programas de Open
Adoption & Family
Services, visite nuestro sitio
web mediante el código de
escaneo a la derecha.



[http://www.openadoption.org/pregnancy-counseling/
explorando-sus-opciones-de-embarazo](http://www.openadoption.org/pregnancy-counseling/explorando-sus-opciones-de-embarazo)



**Explora tus
opciones de embarazo.**



Tienes opciones. Te escucharemos
y te apoyaremos en tu decisión.
Para hablar con un consejero confidencial ahora
llama al 1-800-985-6763 a cualquier hora.



**Puedes tomar una decisión que
refleja tus valores y creencias.**



Nuestros consejeros
te ayudarán a
explorar tus opciones:

- La crianza
- El aborto
- La adopción



*"Me siento en paz sabiendo que durante mi embarazo
consideré todas mis opciones con alguien que
me escuchó y confió en mi habilidad de tomar
mis propias decisiones."*
- Una cliente de OARFS

Estamos aquí para apoyarte
y proveerte información
de manera imparcial para
que puedas tomar
la mejor decisión para ti.

- ¿Cuánto sabes acerca de cada opción?
- ¿Acerca de cuál opción te gustaría tener
más información?
- ¿Quién te puede apoyar mientras
consideras tus opciones?
- ¿Cómo te sientes sobre este embarazo y
qué quieres para ti y tu familia?

¿Cómo funciona el proceso de adopción en OA&FS?

Si te decides por la adopción te ayudaremos a **crear el mejor plan para ti y para tu bebé**. Tú elegirás la familia adoptiva después de leer un estudio que describe en forma detallada su estilo de vida, sus valores y creencias, su relación matrimonial, y sus razones por querer ser padres adoptivos. También podrás revisar su perfil, que incluye fotos, videos y autobiografías.

- Tu hijo será criado sabiendo quiénes y que lo amas.

- Todos nuestros servicios son gratuitos para ti.
- Te proveeremos apoyo, consejería y asesoramiento relacionado con la adopción por toda la vida. También ofrecemos los mismos servicios para el padre de nacimiento, abuelos y otros familiares.
- Serás una parte importante de nuestra comunidad adoptiva, que está llena de oportunidades para conectarse con otras madres biológicas a través de retiros, talleres y eventos sociales.

- Tú determinarás el nivel de contacto que te gustaría tener con la familia adoptiva. Si quieres, puedes conocerlos y formar una relación amistosa y afectuosa con la familia. Nosotros estaremos presentes para ayudarles a sentirse cómodos mientras empiezan a conocerse. Tú y los padres adoptivos pueden crear un contrato legal para asegurar la continuidad de las visitas a futuro. Cualquier familia adoptiva que elijas de nuestra agencia estará feliz de tener una relación de por vida contigo y con tu familia.



¿Cómo me puede ayudar un consejero o un asesor psicológico?

En OA&FS ofrecemos asesoría confidencial para que tengas un lugar seguro donde explorar todas tus opciones. Puedes venir tantas veces como quieras, sin costo alguno para ti. Estamos aquí para proveerte la información que necesitas para tomar la mejor decisión para ti. Es de nuestro agrado ofrecerte **compasión, comprensión y aceptación**. Lo que nos distingue de otras agencias de adopción es que estamos aquí para **apoyarte independientemente de la decisión que tomes**. Somos una agencia sin fines de lucro y sin asociaciones religiosas, y siempre te trataremos con **dignidad y respeto**. Si te gustaría hablar en persona con un **consejero**, tenemos oficinas en las ciudades de Portland, Eugene y Seaside. Nuestros consejeros también pueden viajar dentro de los estados de Oregon y Washington para encontrarse contigo.



Clara con sus padres adoptivos Susan y Erik.



Clara, adoptada mediante OA&FS, con su madre biológica, Bethany.

There are significant differences between OA&FS and state adoptions.

OA&FS

DHS

TIMELINE

OA&FS can plan an adoption within a few days with trained families who are ready to adopt.



DHS adoption process takes approximately three years.

FOSTER CARE

The agency places the child directly with the adoptive family.



DHS children often have prolonged stays in foster care prior to adoption.

ADOPTION CONSENTS

Voluntary relinquishment.



Involuntary relinquishment in a combative, expensive court process.

CHOOSING A FAMILY

Birthparents select a family after reading extensive information about them.



A family is chosen on a child's behalf behind closed doors.

ONGOING RELATIONSHIP

Birthparents meet and form a lifelong relationship with the adoptive family.



Adoptive parents have no open adoption training, and no incentive to include the birthparents who fade away unless the caseworker supports openness.

OA&FS

DHS

ONGOING VISITS CONTRACT

Birthparents have access to a legally enforceable contract for ongoing visits, averaging 3-4 per year.



Few birthparents have an agreement for visits, which isn't enforceable.

ONGOING AGENCY SERVICES

Provides lifelong relationship guidance and adoption-related counseling.



No ongoing counseling or relationship support.

BIRTHPARENT OUTCOMES

They feel heard and valued. They have a lifelong relationship with their child and the family.



An adversarial and humiliating process leaves them without their child.

OUTCOMES FOR CHILD

Value that their birthparents stayed in their lives. Have high self-esteem and strong sense of identity.



Struggle with lifelong issues and feel abandoned by birthparents.

ADOPTIVE FAMILY OUTCOMES

Welcome the birthparents, include them as part of their extended family.



Feel unsupported, fear the birthparents, and struggle with how to help their child.

COST TO TAXPAYERS

No cost to taxpayers.



Rising costs for foster care, court process and preventative and treatment services for traumatized kids.

Our unique collaborative relationship with DHS.

In 2010, OA&FS presented this solution to DHS and we forged a collaborative relationship that has thrived. When high risk moms learn about [our pre-emptive alternative to state adoption](#), it becomes a feasible option for them. Maybe they have had previous children removed by the state and they're pregnant again; this time they want to plan an open adoption instead. Maybe due to the chronic nature of the challenges they face, open adoption becomes a viable choice for them. Maybe they know that adoption will be in their future and they want an adoption through which they'll have a voice in the planning process and an active role in their child's life. Through OA&FS, this empowering model is available to them.

Now, DHS workers and service providers, who work with high risk moms throughout the state refer expectant parents to us routinely. They've seen the process unfold and are pleased by how well it meets the ongoing needs of birthparents and their kids. However, there needs to be more widespread information about and access to this successful alternative.



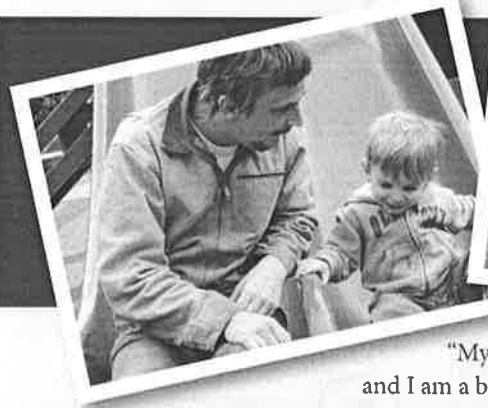
Meet Open Adoptee Christine

Christine and her siblings were

given a way out of the state system. They grew up with the security of caring families. Christine was adopted through OA&FS at age three; she is now a 25-year old engaging and thoughtful young woman. Before her placement she lived with her birthparents, who struggled with addiction, and then in a foster home for 10 months. The first time she met her adoptive parents, Susan and Erik, she ran to them with arms wide open saying "New mommy dad!". As Erik says from that point forward, they never let go. Within a year Christine's sister, Jamie, then six months old joined them. Christine deeply appreciates how open, non-judgmental and unconditionally loving her parents have always been as they guided the girls

through the placement of two more birth siblings in other OA&FS families, the death of their birthmom and the ongoing relationship with their birthfather. This has spanned joyous times when their extended birth and adoptive families celebrated holidays together, and tender times as Christine has navigated her sibling relationships as an adult. Christine says that open adoption has taught her "there are no limits to how much love you can give and receive". [Watch Christine's story at http://bit.ly/2e83QmJ](http://bit.ly/2e83QmJ).

Christine completed an internship with OA&FS for her Child and Family Studies program at Portland State University. We are honored to have Christine join us on her path to becoming a social worker. She'd like to volunteer for CASA someday so she can advocate for kids who are vulnerable and in transition, like she once was.



Meet Birthfather Chris

"My name is Chris and I am a birthfather. I was

24 years old when I found out that I was going to be a father. The news had me so excited that I began to forget who I was. I was quickly falling into the world of drugs and ending up in and out of jail for reasons I wish not to explain. I was overjoyed when I found out that we were going to be expecting a son. Shortly after finding out our baby's sex, his mother informed me that she wanted to place him for adoption.

Growing up in the foster system, I was scared because of everything that I went through. When I then found out that it was going to be open adoption through Open Adoption & Family Services, I felt somewhat relieved. During the pregnancy I always promised my child that he would have a better life than I had. I didn't want to lose my son so I convinced his mom to try and co-parent, but would keep an open mind about adoption if we were unable to.

Everything was going wonderful for the most part. We chose approximately eight families that we were comfortable with if

we decided to go through with the open adoption, but out of these only two families were willing adopt our son, due to us having mental disabilities. Then one day I got a call no father wanted to hear. My son's mother had preeclampsia and they were going to have to induce labor about 27 days early. I was scared beyond belief. On November 23, 2009 she gave birth to a very healthy baby boy. It was love at first sight.

The next day was the worst day that ever happened to me. Child Protective Services came to the hospital. They began to use every mistake we had ever made in our past against us. So we made the decision to call our adoption counselor at Open Adoption & Family Services and let her know everything that was going on with CPS.

We made the decision to go with the open adoption and gave her the name of the family we were most comfortable with. The next day we met the wonderful parents. We were overjoyed when they agreed to work with us on naming our son. We named him Tristen. Today he is a thriving six-year-old big brother to a beautiful baby sister. I have never regretted our decision to give our son a better life."

**Pregnant?
You have choices.
Your voice matters.**

OPEN ADOPTION ALTERNATIVE TO STATE ADOPTION.

**If you struggle with
issues related to:**

- Mental Health
- Homelessness
- Addiction
- Domestic Violence
- Incarceration
- Or Other Challenges

**▶ You may be at risk of child
welfare involvement which
could include your child
being placed in foster care.**



**It's important to carefully
consider your options:**

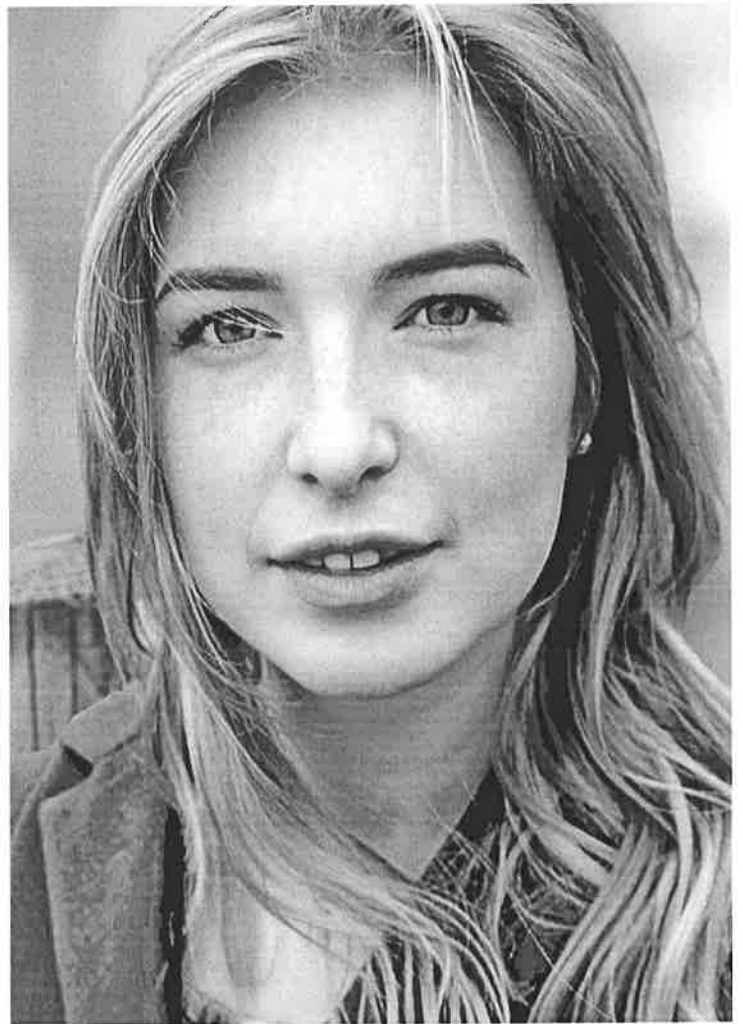
REUNIFICATION

STATE ADOPTION

OA&FS OPEN ADOPTION

**With free options counseling at
Open Adoption & Family Services,
we can help.**

- You access free services and resources.
- You make an informed choice.
- You are supported no matter what you decide.



**Don't give up on having
a lifelong relationship
with your child.**

**TALK TO A COUNSELOR 24/7
1-800-772-1115**



**OPEN ADOPTION
& FAMILY SERVICES**
OPENADOPT.ORG 1-800-772-1115

parents a voice.

We're here to help.

We share your concern about the limited choices available to these vulnerable moms and their children. She deserves access to information and resources about all of her options. We provide a transparent conversation with moms before her child is removed about her options: reunification, state adoption process, or proactively planning an open adoption with OA&FS.

Then she can truly make an informed and empowering choice regarding her child's future, and potentially avoid foster care. She can take ownership of her decision, and not feel victimized by the state process.

We provide our support regardless of her decision.

Redefining Adoption

Many moms in the system believe the only type of adoption that's available to them is a state adoption.

- What if "adoption" is redefined as an open adoption in which she is empowered with resources and information as she makes vital choices?

Continued inside -



OA&FS: A partner for professionals working with expectant parents.

OA&FS is a pro-choice, non-profit open adoption agency that has promoted diversity and inclusion since 1985. We're licensed in Oregon and Washington, and as the national referral for Planned Parenthood, we provide services throughout the U.S. We offer all options pregnancy counseling and open adoption planning. We look forward to hearing from you and sharing information about our innovative model of choice, empowerment and relationship building.

Contact us to order additional materials or go to our online resource center.

OPEN ADOPTION & FAMILY SERVICES
1-800-772-1115
INFO@OPENADOPT.ORG OPENADOPT.ORG



**"WE HEAL,
NOT IN ISOLATION
BUT IN
TOGETHERNESS."**

**SERVICE PROVIDER
RESOURCES 2018**

**OPEN ADOPTION
& FAMILY SERVICES**
1-800-772-1115 OPENADOPT.ORG

Giving expectant

At Open Adoption & Family Services, our services always start with respecting and honoring the expectant parent.

Pregnant and parenting moms receive non-directive, all-options pregnancy counseling as they explore all of their choices. If she decides to pursue an open adoption plan, this empowerment process continues as she reviews detailed info about our diverse pool of adoptive families. She chooses, meets and forms a genuine ongoing relationship with the adoptive family that's similar to an extended family relationship.

We provide lifelong services, including counseling and relationship guidance.

An Alternative to State Adoption

As a recent state of Oregon audit illustrates, foster care and the state child welfare system are overburdened.

Pregnant and parenting moms who are struggling with addiction, homelessness, domestic violence, incarceration or mental illness are at a high risk of having their child placed in the foster care system.

Continued from *flap* -

- What if open adoption is a process in which she feels heard, valued and respected?
- What if open adoption means she'll hand-lead the family, have an active, honored role in her child's life and be present to watch them grow and thrive?

At OA&FS, these are the core tenets of our innovative model.

Family Preservation

In our process family preservation is achieved by adding family and support. The birth and adoptive extended families become the safety net for the child. This recognizes and addresses the child's need to include the birth family in their life, and the birthparent's need to not be separated from their child.

Moms Have Rights in Adoption

At OA&FS, she can create an open adoption in which she chooses, meets and forms an ongoing extended family relationship with the adoptive parents. We provide ongoing counseling and relationship guidance. She's not separated from her child; she has an active, honored role in their life.

Who Can Benefit?

- At-risk moms who want to make a proactive, informed plan for their child.
- Moms who've experienced a state adoption, are pregnant again and this time want an open adoption.
- Moms who want to access this option as a back-up plan if a state adoption becomes imminent later.



Working together to ensure expectant parents are supported, heard and valued.

We understand that expectant parents have different needs. We've collaborated with service providers like you to create two separate brochures so you can provide them with the most relevant information.

For At-Risk Pregnant and Parenting Moms

Are you working with moms who are at risk of state intervention, and are struggling with the following issues?

- Mental Health
- Addiction
- Incarceration
- Homelessness
- Domestic Violence?

This brochure provides them with vital information, choices and resources.



For All Expectant Parents

If you're working with moms who are seeking a safe place that's free of judgment to explore all of their pregnancy options, or plan an open adoption, this brochure gives them access to our unbiased support.



Voices of Open Adoption



"Open adoption has shown me that love is limitless. It has empowered me to be the writer of my own story. I have always known I was loved deeply by so many people."

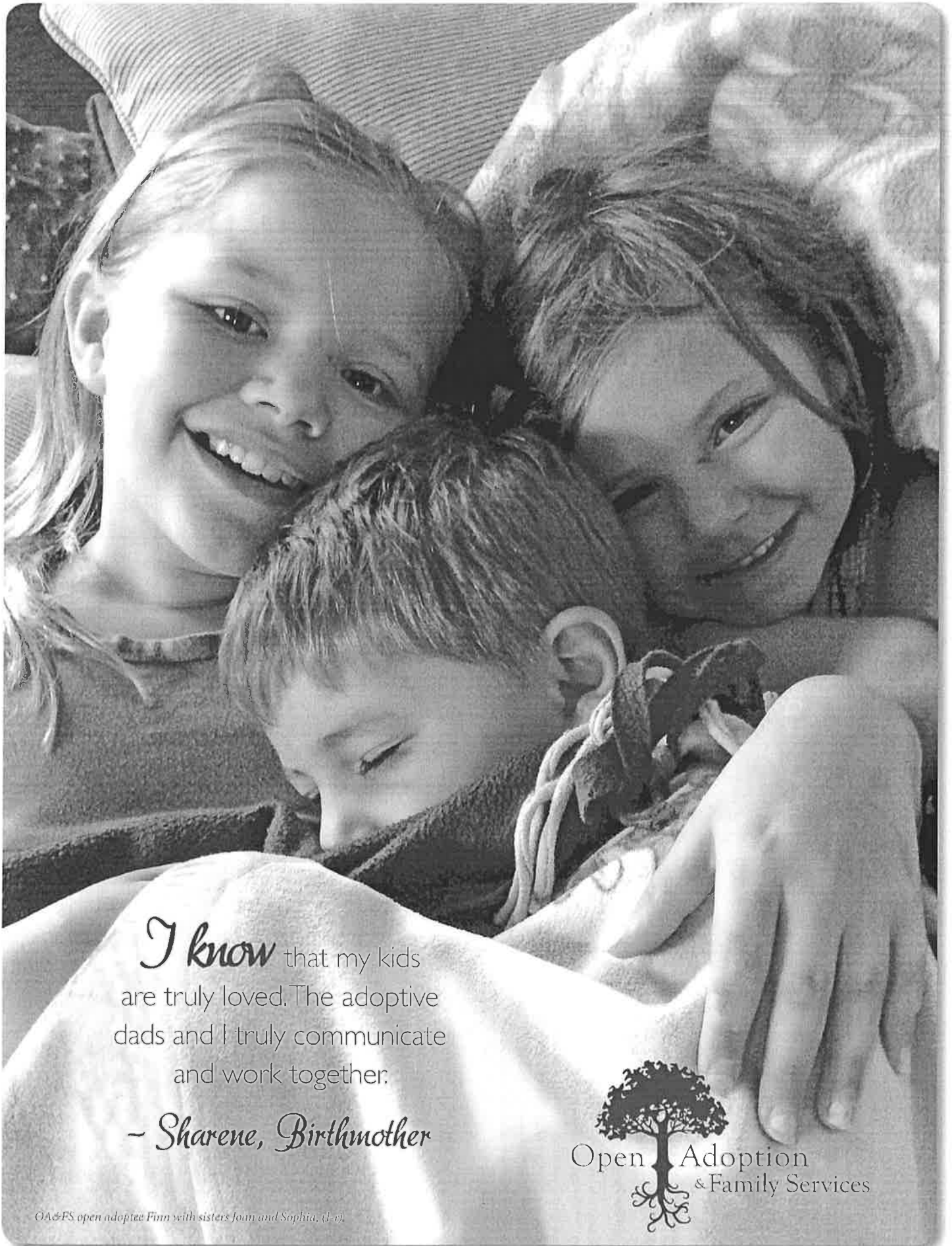
In open adoption there are no lies or secrets. Just the truth. In my family we believe the truth is always right. It may not always be easy, but it is always the right thing. The honesty and openness my parents have shown me has created an unbreakable bond in our relationship and has helped me become the woman I am today."

- Open Adoptee Christine

Advice for at-risk pregnant and parenting moms: "If it's important for you to maintain some control over the situation then I would recommend open adoption. It's a lot easier to have a say in what happens to the kids and who adopts them versus DHS making that choice. I wanted to know Preston as he grew up. So far it has exceeded my expectations."

- Birthmom Misty





I know that my kids
are truly loved. The adoptive
dads and I truly communicate
and work together.

- *Sharene, Birthmother*



Hospitious dads and supportive birth family unite three siblings through open adoption.

by Shari Levine



Finn, OA&FS open adoptee.

Joanie, as well as their birth families. Read and view their inspiring story!

Why were you drawn to adopt through OA&FS

PETER. We liked the open and honest and transparent quality of the organization and we strongly believe in open adoption. We want our kids to know who their birthparents are, have an ongoing relationship with the birthparents as they get older and we don't really believe in secrets.

BRADY. [Open Adoption & Family Services was very open to gays and lesbians](#) and that obviously was important to us too.

What did you learn in your preparation to adopt that serves you now?

BRADY. We learned how important it is for everybody involved to have an open adoption; for everyone to have open lines of communication. It helps not only the birth family, but also the children as they get older. They can go back to their birth family and ask questions and get answers that they need.

PETER. If we have problems, issues or concerns with Sharene, the birthmom, we can just lay them out there and she does the same with us. Sometimes they're hard discussions to have but we've had them and continue to have a really good relationship.

We recently checked in on Brady and Peter, OA&FS adoptive parents extraordinaire. Brady is on the OA&FS Board of Directors and often shares their adoption story at our seminar. These are two remarkable adoptive dads who have opened their hearts to Finn and his big sisters Sophia and



Tell the story of your first adoption. What were memorable moments of feeling empathy for and connecting with Sharene?

PETER. We first met Sharene about four or five months before Finn was born. We had a great first meeting, we just talked and talked and got to know her really well.

BRADY. Well, you talked.

PETER. Yeah. (Smiles.)

BRADY. I couldn't really talk during most of it.

PETER. You were kind of emotional.

BRADY. A little emotional.

BOTH. (Laughs.)

PETER. She was very honest. She told her whole life story basically in that first meeting and how Finn came to be. We really appreciated that. And then over the next four months we met with her and talked about naming the baby, and how we wanted him to grow up. We went to her prenatal appointments and were there at the hospital when Finn was born, which was pretty amazing.

BRADY. We spent about four days in the hospital with Sharene and really got to know her and bond with her and our new little family all together.

PETER. You got to cut the cord when Finn was born.

PETER. It was a happy and sad time too because, obviously, we're happy this new life came into the world, but it was also sad because Sharene did have to say goodbye to Finn at that time.

But we also knew that she would always be in his life. So it was a bittersweet occasion.



Watch Video: Brady and Peter's Interview

... "Hospitous dads" continued from Page 1

BRADY. It was scary too because the hospital just let us take home this brand new baby and we had no idea what we were doing! I remember kind of freaking out on the drive home not knowing what to do next and not sleeping at all for the next two days or so.

PETER. I think we cried that first night because we didn't know what to do and he wouldn't stop crying.

BRADY. I finally called my mom and had her come over and take care of all of us.

BRADY. A few months later Sharene got married and I had the honor of giving her away at her wedding. We had become that close. She really is part of our family now.

How did you come to adopt Finn's older sisters?

BRADY. We wanted Finn to know his older birth sisters so we would go visit them frequently. Whenever we'd visit the birthmom we would go to the home that the girls were living in at the time too. When Finn was almost a year old

the girls got placed into another foster home and it became apparent that they weren't going to be adopted so we started that process. It took us quite a few months to get them but we wanted to make sure that Finn and his sisters were together and kept that connection.

How old were Finn's sisters when you adopted them?

PETER. Joan had just



Sophia in the garden.

turned six and Sophia was three. That's when they moved in, and Finn was two. And about a year later we adopted them.

BRADY. It was a different process. We went through the state to adopt the girls and it took about 14 months after they moved into our house, but it took about 10 months just to get certified to have them in our house so it was almost two years from the start of the process until the adoption was finalized.

BRADY. And with Finn by the time he was four months old the adoption process was finalized.



Sharene, Joan, Sophia and Finn on a museum visit.

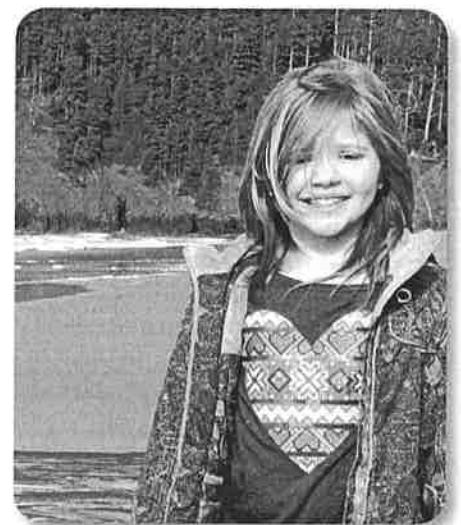
Did you have any kind of celebration or way to recognize when your children were officially adopted?

BRADY. With Finn he was so young we didn't do a big celebration. But when the girls were adopted we did have an adoption party. We invited our families over and framed their adoption certificates and had cake and ice cream.

PETER. It's a totally different process when you adopt kids that are older. Also with them in the foster care system they have more issues. So we've had them in therapy a lot and it's been a long difficult struggle – and it will continue to be – but we're still here and we're still a family.

Please describe your current relationship with the childrens' birthmother.

PETER. Sharene is wonderful, we have a really good relationship with her. She's like our family. She has three visits a year at least where she sees all three kids. And she talks on the phone with them and texts and sends pictures. It's just a very honest and open and loving relationship. If there are issues or concerns



Joan at the beach.



Peter and kids take in the surf.

Sharene was adopted through open adoption.

PETER. (Her adoption) was through the state foster system.

BRADY. So there's even more birth family members.

PETER. It's a very complicated web of family members, but it's a good relationship.

How do the kids talk about their relationship with Sharene with their peers?

PETER. I think I've heard Joanie say, "this is my birthmom Sharene". We made life books for the kids, Sophia and Joanie, so they could understand their path through life starting with Sharene, and all the foster families pictures and things. They understand (Sharene's) their birth mom, but she couldn't take care of them. So other people and now we take care of them. They refer to her as "my birth mommy Sharene" or "Mommy Sharene". Sharene is very respectful about us being the parents and setting the rules and raising them. She completely understands and respects that. I think we both respect each other's boundaries in terms of privacy.

Describe your life as a family now.

BOTH. (Laughs.)

BRADY. I mean, three kids.

PETER. It's nonstop the moment they get up until the moment they go to bed. (We have a) very active household. They're always exploring and running around and energetic and jumping. We live on a farm, so they explore outside a lot and play with the animals. We do things together of course, like any family – vacations and outings and things like that.

Could you give us a snapshot of what each of your children is like?

BRADY. Joan is very inquisitive and needs to know everything about everything. She's pretty smart, so she can retain that information.

PETER. She is very extroverted and a social butterfly. A very intelligent, inquisitive, curious child who's very active. Though

– even though they might be difficult – we bring them up with her and she does likewise with us.
BRADY. Sharene's been really great about introducing us to other birth family members too.

because of all the experiences she's had, and trauma, she's had some issues she's had to deal with.

BRADY. Sophia is a little princess. Or she likes to think. She's a little cutie.

PETER. She loves to play dress up, has an active imagination and wears her heart on her sleeve. She's very emotional – you know when she's upset, you know when she's happy, she's like a volcano, she erupts!

BOTH. (Laughs.)

PETER. It's true!

BRADY. Finn is wild.

PETER. We call him Bam-Bam right now because he's four and is extremely physical. He runs around, throws, wrestles, but also has a sweet nurturing side. He'll go up to kittens and pet them, sees little babies and pets them.

BRADY. He's a little snuggle bug.

PETER. (Finn) loves to snuggle, all the kids like to cuddle.

BRADY. But then he'll go rip a door off of its hinges and throw it at somebody.

PETER. Hopefully he'll grow out of it.

BOTH. (Laughs.)

BRADY. Or we'll channel it to some Olympic sport or something. Parkour, that's what we're looking at.

Is there anything that you'd like to add?

PETER. (Open adoption is) an ongoing journey, like parenting. It's never ending and you never have all the answers, so you just figure it out as you go along.

BRADY. It seems to always turn out for the best. No matter what the struggles are they always work themselves out. ■

Shari Levine is the Executive Director of Open Adoption & Family Services, and an adoptive parent of two children in open adoptions.



Brady, Peter, birthmother Sharene and newborn Finn.

Birthmother Sharene's story: "They're the best Daddies ever".



Sharene holding baby Finn.

by Shari
Levine

We first started working with Sharene in 2010, when she reached out to OA&FS as part of our collaborative relationship with Oregon

Department of Human Services. She had – and continues to have – a strong vision for her children's lives. Because of this, she was featured in our video "[Open Adoption: An Alternative to Foster Care](#)", which chronicles the early stages of Finn's adoption. We've kept in touch since then, and are so grateful to Sharene for continuing to share her experiences. So often in adoption the focus is on the moment the baby is placed. Now that her son Finn is four, Sharene, along with Finn's Dads Peter and Brady, have a more evolved open adoption story to tell. Here's hers.

Why did you choose to plan an adoption with OA&FS?

I chose to plan an adoption for Finn with Open Adoption & Family Services because I had two older children, Joan and Sophia, that were placed in foster care. Given their experience of abuse, feeling neglected and unloved and having to constantly be shuffled back to an abuser's home, I didn't want Finn to go through that. I wanted him to have a better upbringing – a good and happy life without fear. Where he can grow as a normal child and I can still try and be his mom the best I can. Picking OA&FS was one of the best things I've ever done.

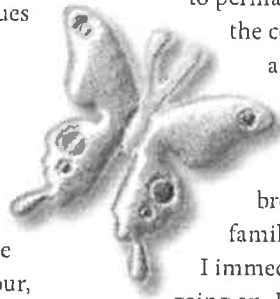
What was your experience with DHS regarding your older daughters and foster care?

My girls felt unwanted and unloved. They weren't happy and would beg to come home

constantly. It was really tough to watch my children go through that and not be there every day to hold them and tell them it's okay. Based upon what happened to my girls, making the decision (to place in open adoption) was best for my son. It wasn't the easiest, but I knew I was doing the right thing. Especially after watching my daughters being shuffled into another foster home and asking "Does anybody love me? Am I wanted?" I say yes, you're wanted. I want you every day, trust me that. I tell them that all the time. It was hard.

How did Brady and Peter come to adopt your older daughters?

Things went awry in the home where my daughters were supposed to permanently live. When that family started to break up and the couple got divorced my girls were removed. Since Brady and Peter were raising their brother, I had worked hard with them to have a bond with my girls. Every time Brady and Peter came to visit me they would also visit Joan and Sophia. The girls could see their brother, spend time with him and bond with the whole family. When I got the call that the girls had been removed, I immediately called Brady and Peter and told them what was going on. Brady said, "Let me call Peter. We're going to talk and we'll call you back." And that's what they did. They stood up and took my girls, and have been wonderful fathers to them. The best daddies ever, and great role models. I couldn't ask for better fathers.



... "Sharene's story" continued from Page 4

What does having an open adoption with ongoing visits mean to you?

It means that I get to be a part of my kids' life. I see them grow and experience things. I may not get to be there every day, but I still enjoy being involved through pictures, videos, text messages and phone calls. I visit my kids every three months and am with them for a whole day. We go out, have lots of fun and make lots of memories. We have such a wonderful time. And the bond is strong. They're always happy and excited to see their mom.

Can you share any memorable moments of your time together?

Oh, there's so many! I have great pictures of them playing together, running around, eating lunch. We go to parks, museums, the zoo, and have a blast! We just had the time of our lives. When I took Finn's biological dad to meet him for the first time it was really great. We all went to the agency's main office in Portland and Finn bonded to his birthfather instantly. It was adorable.

What do you appreciate most about Brady and Peter?

I think most of all the hard work, the dedication, the consideration that they have for me as well. And the fact that even after adopting my son, they also took on Joan and Sophia. That never happens. They have been the children's rock. I don't think I could ever be more grateful for two men in my life who have stepped up to the plate. It really shows what it means to be the world's greatest fathers. And they truly are. I made the best decision ever picking them the day I read their letter. I still to this day stand by my words – they are the ones. They've followed through with

everything they've said in their letter. They've gone above and beyond and more. They're just two amazing men. I will forever be in their debt. They're the reasons my kids are growing up happy, healthy, and normal children. I couldn't ask for anything more.

How do you feel when you spend time together?

I feel like we're a family. We get along great, we laugh, we joke. My relationship with them is amazing. I talk to them constantly. We text or instant message each other just about every day. Peter is really awesome about sending me pictures and videos of the kids. It's great when I'll be off doing something and my phone buzzes with a text message from Peter. I'll open it up, and it's a picture of the kids or a video of them playing soccer, running their little hearts out going for the goal. It's the greatest thing ever.

What are your hopes and dreams for your children in this open adoption relationship?

That they can see that three different people can work together, and strive to give them the best that they possibly can. And know that they are truly loved. And that we truly work and communicate together for them. The greatest thing is how Brady and Peter have involved me. There's never anything I have to worry about. I'm always right there, even if I'm a couple of miles away. They're awesome. ■

Shari Levine is the Executive Director of Open Adoption & Family Services, and an adoptive parent of two children in open adoptions. Answers were edited for clarity.



A story of empathy and love.

by Shari Levine

Josh and Matt are natural stewards of open adoption; the core tenets of compassion and respect are reflected in their relationships. It's a worldview that is deeply meaningful to them. When asked what inspired this philosophy, Josh said, "My own struggles with my family – we had a pretty significant falling out over the whole gay thing. I know what it feels like to be abandoned and lost and not able to get your head above water. Coming from my own trauma I am able to find more compassion for people who have experienced or are experiencing a trauma."

First step, foster adoption.

Initially Josh and Matt planned to adopt through DHS in a state adoption. As foster parents they quickly fell in love with the sibling group of three who were placed in their care, and hoped to adopt them. However, they were troubled by the DHS process and that the birthmom, Misty, felt vilified.

Misty: "I felt that DHS was trying to control the situation, verses considering the needs of me and my kids, and how they could help us succeed."

Josh and Matt saw Misty in a sympathetic light and wanted to connect with her and understand her. As they reached out and created a bridge into her world, they listened to her story and empathized with the challenges she'd faced in her life. "It was our choice to sit and get to know her. Everybody deserves a chance, and because we loved the kids we were fostering so much, we wanted to get to know her and find out where she was coming from. It's basic compassion."

Respect + listening = trust.

Misty hadn't experienced many people in her life who sincerely wanted know her and she slowly let her guard down. Said Josh, "in these talks we learned of the tragedies in her life. We listened and she began to trust us. She saw our compassion, and knew that we really cared. She saw that we treated her the same way we treated her children – with love, kindness and respect."

Adoptee Preston meets birth sibling Randy



OA&FS open adoptee Preston and adoptive dad Matt with birthfather Bryan holding newborn birth sibling Randy.

... "Empathy and Love continued from Page 1

That enabled Misty to have a true appreciation for the stability they provided her and her children. This trust redefined what adoption could look like for her. It was no longer an adversarial DHS process rooted in failure. She knew that through this bond with Josh and Matt, she and her children would all have an ongoing relationship. She wasn't being marginalized or demonized. She was being accepted, understood and welcomed into their lives.

A real bond develops.

Ultimately, of the three children Josh and Matt were fostering, the two older children were returned to Misty's care. The youngest, who was a baby at the time, lives with his father and aunt. But the bond Matt and Josh had with Misty and her children was very real and they continued to visit and provide a network of support. They

genuinely cared about her and her children. "She had gratitude for us for everything we did for her kids. We wanted to be a support for her as well and provide some of that normalcy she'd never experienced."

Exploring open adoption.

Josh and Matt decided to move forward in creating their family through open adoption and attended the OA&FS seminar. Having an ongoing relationship with the birth family was a priority for them. "Our foster care situation

showed us how important it is to stay in contact with the birth family. We were hoping for a situation with a birthmother and family that wanted to be involved in the child's life – that extended family feel where we can support each other."

After her children were returned to her care and the youngest went

... continued on Page 3

Preston's family album.



From left: OA&FS open adoptee Preston (in vest) with birth siblings Nikita, Alex and Owen, with adoptive parents Josh and Matt and with birth brother Alex.

to live with his aunt and father, Misty became pregnant again. She decided to put her newfound trust into action, bravely crossed the divide and pro-actively planned an open adoption with Josh and Matt. They openly embraced Misty, birthfather Bryan and their child. Together, they planned an identified adoption through OA&FS and Preston was born two weeks later.

Over the past two years, Josh and Matt have created an extended family relationship with Bryan, Misty, Preston's siblings and his entire birth family. They've reached out and cultivated a network of love and support for Preston. They also continue to be a safety net for Misty as she parents her other children.

"It's fantastic. We make a point of seeing each other pretty much every holiday and most birthdays. We just saw them on Sunday, they're coming over for dinner next weekend. We talk, and come to pick up the kids on occasion to see them too." Josh said.

Bryan and Misty live together now and recently had baby Randy, who they're also parenting. "And the new kicker, Preston now has a full-blooded brother, Randy! She and Preston's father came back together and now have a new baby son. We were among the first people in the hospital to meet him! He just turned two months old."

Josh and Matt's natural hospitious nature has created a model for Preston as he develops relationships with his birth family. When asked what they hope that looks like Josh shared, "I hope it deepens over time, that Preston will have special activities with them. I guess a similar role would be a close knit family friend, or aunt, or uncle. A role model and someone that they do stuff with - have special times."

Josh and Matt feel very comfortable in their open adoption relationships. I asked what's contributed to this feeling, and Josh said, "every time we visit with Misty and Bryan we can see that they still care about Preston very much, and light up when they see him. They really did this from a place of love themselves, and

that makes me feel good that they made the best choice for them. Birthdays, Christmas, any time we see them we feel this. It's ongoing."

I asked him to describe a defining moment in their relationship. "When we invited Bryan and Misty over as friends. It wasn't to see the kid or because of our open adoption agreement. We invited them to this Christmas party we host and they came! We felt that that was a really big deal. They didn't know anybody but us!"

These birth and adoptive parents have formed a genuine friendship. They love and care about each

other for who they are. **Josh and Matt expressed that this kind of bond was only made possible by the fact that Misty openly choose to entrust Preston to them.** It wasn't being forced on her in a disempowering and adversarial battle. Instead, she was able to pro-actively and intentionally place Preston with a trusted family, one who would always honor her.

Many prospective adoptive families are fearful of welcoming birthparents who are struggling and are at risk of DHS intervention into their lives. I asked Josh how they overcame that fear. "Learning empathy. We now look at birthparents as someone who's made a sacrifice, not someone doing something because they don't love their kid. That no matter how horrible someone's situation is, they are people too. Learning how bad Misty had it growing up has given us insight into how and why she is the way she is, and why she's made the choices she has. We've been able to look at her with compassion and see her humanity."

When asked what they'd want other adoptive parents to know about developing an open adoption relationship with birthparents who are struggling, Josh said, "Learn the birthparents' history. Find out where they're coming from. When you know their background and history and what's happened in their life, you'll have compassion for them. You have to be open to that and want a compassionate relationship. Opening up your heart to those people, even if they might not want to let you in. Respect that person for the choice that they're making, and learn to look with the eyes of compassion." ■

Shari Levine is the Executive Director of Open Adoption & Family Services and an adoptive parent of two children in open adoptions.

Misty: "I wanted to know Preston as he grew up. So far it has exceeded my expectations."



Misty: Advice for at-risk pregnant and parenting moms: "If it's important for you to maintain some control over the situation then I would recommend open adoption. It's a lot easier to have a say what happens to the kids and who adopts them verses DHS making that choice."



OA&FS open adoptee Preston with birth siblings Nikita and Alex (r-l).



**CONVERSATION
STARTERS
FOR MOMS
AT RISK OF STATE
INVOLVEMENT.**

**How do
you feel
about
parenting
at this time?**

**What do you
think about
meeting the
reunification
requirements?**

**What do
you want
to know
about
alternatives
to parenting,
foster care
or state
adoption?**



**OPEN ADOPTION
& FAMILY SERVICES**
1-800-772-1115 OPENADOPT.ORG

Here's how Oregon CPS and OA&FS can team up to reduce the number of children entering the foster care system.

1

OA&FS provides free statewide trainings on our open adoption process to CPS and adoption caseworkers at DHS.

2

OA&FS and DHS create a collaborative relationship in which they share resources to support at-risk moms.

3

When a mom chooses to plan an open adoption through OA&FS, DHS will be kept informed of her adoption status.

4

OA&FS is a continuing resource for DHS caseworkers.

Positive outcomes for children and parents, relief for state systems.

- Children are prevented from unnecessarily entering foster care.
- Children are saved from potential trauma.
- Children gain early permanency.
- The mom has an ongoing role in her child's life.
- The birth family has an ongoing relationship with the adoptive family, much like extended family.
- Family unification is maintained.
- DHS caseloads are lightened.
- Cost savings are realized: no foster care, termination hearing or preventative and treatment services for traumatized kids.



OA&FS adoptee Kyle with his birthparents Kyle and Sky and adoptive parents Kale and Kerryann.

This is how our collaborative relationship with DHS currently works.

I. Responding to Child Safety:

- A. The DHS Hotline responds to public calls of child abuse/neglect. For each call CPS receives, a screening process begins. DHS makes a determination whether or not to conduct an assessment of the family and a report is written.
- B. In many cases, following the screening a CPS caseworker will conduct a safety assessment. After an assessment is completed, CPS and law enforcement staff decides (with family assistance, if possible) if the child can safely remain at home. DHS has the authority to remove a child from the home if the child is in immediate danger of abuse.
- C. DHS must request a shelter hearing within 24 hours when a child has been removed from the care of their parent and placed in protective custody. A subsequent hearing is held to consider the facts of the child abuse assessment. Additional hearings are held if the court determines a child needs its protection.

2. Collaboration Process:

- A. If the mom plans an adoption with Open Adoption & Family Services (OA&FS) at birth, prior to DHS establishing wardship, OA&FS would complete the adoption according to our protocol.
- B. If she plans an adoption with OA&FS after DHS establishes wardship the DHS caseworker, the birthmom, the OA&FS representative and the adoptive parents would go before a judge.

The wardship would be transferred to OA&FS, and then immediately dismissed as the birthparent signs the consents and OA&FS places the child with the adoptive family.

- C. DHS would only search for a suitable relative to adopt the child if DHS has custody of the child. If the mom wants to make (or has made) a reasonable adoption plan prior to wardship, the relative rule doesn't apply. Even after wardship, the relative rule doesn't apply if the mom is actively engaged in a reasonable adoption plan and a judge transfers the wardship from DHS to OA&FS.

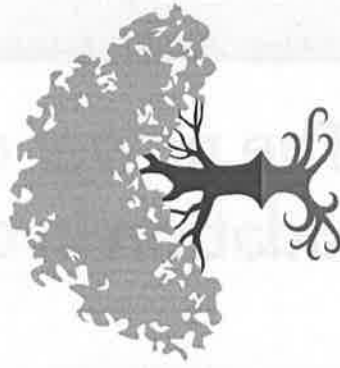
3. DHS' Collaborative Relationships with OA&FS (sample scenarios):

- A. First time pregnancy for mom (no prior DHS involvement). Due to risk factors during pregnancy: drug or alcohol use, homelessness, domestic violence, mental illness or baby tests positive for drugs at birth, DHS is notified by a mandatory reporter. If birthmom has contacted us and is actively planning an adoption, allow her to work with us.
- B. Mom has had previous involvement with DHS regarding older children and DHS is aware of her current pregnancy. If during the CPS assessment a safety plan is put in place and mom wants to plan an adoption through us, please allow it. At this point the baby is either in the hospital or with a safe relative who is not interested in adopting.
- C. Mom has given birth and taken the baby home. The Healthy Start worker is concerned about her ability to

care for the child and contacts DHS. If the child is under the age of 1.5 years, and the mom would like to plan an adoption with us, please allow her to do so.

Relative Rule Clarification, Nov. 2013

Although the memo specifically refers to voluntary placement, it refers to voluntary placement with the adoption agency, not DHS. 413-070-0069 Responsibilities to Identify Relatives and Persons with a Caregiver Relationship, are both referring to voluntary placement and voluntary custody.



Open Adoption & Family Services

Creating Lifelong Connections

Shari Levine, Executive Director.
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www.openadopt.org

Pioneer BIRTHPARENTS: GARRETT

The power of choice and validation in open adoption.

by Shari Levine

What are the core components of a genuine and fulfilling open adoption? I set out to identify and explore the unique ingredients that birthparents and adoptive parents bring to the table to create not just a good open adoption, but a great open adoption. I wanted to learn more about how we as an agency can foster and develop those key qualities.

I interviewed two pioneer birthparents, Melissa and Garrett, who 20 years ago invested their hopes and dreams in a new adoption model, called open adoption. Join me as we step into their world, their perceptions and experiences that have spanned the last two decades and profoundly touched the lives of many.

As I interviewed them, I set my original questions aside and followed their lead which uncovered new themes that I hadn't considered. The thread that brought together the stories of Melissa and Garrett, the children they placed and the adoptive parents they entrusted them to, were the elements of choice and validation in their open adoptions.

Interview: Birthfather Garrett

Shari: Can you briefly describe your story?

Garrett: When I was 18 my girlfriend got pregnant. I had moved away so when I received the call, I was quite surprised. I realized what we were going to do wasn't really up to me because I had different choices than my girlfriend did.

She had, as I saw it, three choices: she could have the baby and keep it, she could have an abortion, or place the baby in an adoption. I had two choices - whether I was going to be involved or whether I wasn't.

I felt being involved was the responsible thing to do. We settled

pretty quickly on doing an adoption as the best option for us in the situation that we were in. We also had a discussion about the differences between an open and a closed adoption. This was the first time I had ever heard of an open adoption. There are many adopted people in my immediate family and in my extended family, but all of those were closed, so that was what I was familiar with.

Initially I was not excited about the idea of an open adoption, but my girlfriend was more astute than I was about the emotional realities of the situation. She talked to me about open adoption, I read some books and materials on it, and ultimately came around to the idea. I knew that this child would realize that somewhere out there was a birthfather—it's not like that can be kept a secret or should be kept a secret in my opinion. I felt that I should give the choice to the child about how he wanted to approach the situation, and if it were closed I would be taking that choice away from him.

Ultimately we settled on doing an open adoption. We found the agency and a family that we really liked. I will never forget going to their house, sitting on their couch talking with them and me just feeling as awkward as I have ever felt, and just thinking "oh please, I hope they like me, I hope they don't think I'm weird". We talked and apparently I didn't scare them off with my awkwardness - we chose them and they chose us.

Garrett and Fin: THEN AND NOW.



After Fin was born, we did the placement and I thought of that as the end of the story – I now realize it was just the beginning.

He is now 19 years old, the same age I was when he was born, which is absolutely bizarre. It's been one of the great joys and privileges of my life to be involved like I wanted to be, to see him grow up and have the things that I hoped he would: a happy childhood and good life.

Shari: So you were 19 and here was this relationship awaiting you. How did you feel about it?

Garrett: I was very anxious about what was going to be expected of me. I was already profoundly ashamed of not being able to give him what I thought he deserved and to some extent, I wasn't sure what I had to offer. He was going to have a father, who I admired and respected and had chosen in part for that reason.

Shari: You initially moved away to go to college and returned to the area, right?

Garrett: I came back to Portland in 2010. Fin was 11 at that time when I permanently moved back to the Northwest. Before that I was in school or having other adventures around the world. Every time I was in town I would always make a point to go see him, and really enjoyed doing that. Once we were back in the neighborhood so to speak, it made it a lot easier to do that.

Shari: What are some of the values that the adoptive parents brought to the table that made this work? There certainly are birthfathers that move away and never come back. What are some of the ways in which they welcomed you, and made you feel intrinsically valuable and accepted?



Fin (green shirt) with birthfather Garrett, adoptive mom Joell, brother Max, birthmother Katherine and adoptive dad Hans.

Garrett: His parents have always encouraged me to come and see him, and made me feel like I had something to offer him and the family as a whole. Over time I'd like to think that I lost some of my awkwardness and now when we're together it feels much more natural.

Shari: Often in open adoptions, the adoptive moms are very welcoming and gracious. They tend to reach out to the birth

family and actively include them in their lives. I have a theory that it takes the adoptive dad also reaching out to help the birth dad feel like he's has a place in the family too.

Garrett: Yes, I agree. I remember when I took Fin out for lunch years ago and his father said to me,

he just glows after he's with you. That really helped me. To see that Fin was happy and having the life that I thought he deserved, and that he wanted me to be a part of it, and that was important to him, made it all come together for me.

Shari: What other milestone moments have you had?

Garrett: This moment has always stuck out in my mind. It was Fin's 7th birthday party. We were at his house, and because of the nature of open adoption there's a lot of people there – double the amount I guess you would normally have. Fin and I were sitting at the kitchen table and I said, "So Fin now you're seven years old, what are your plans?" And he told me, "Well I'm going to tell you, but you have to guess". So he was writing down hints for me, like an acronym. He wrote T N F. I'm looking at T N F and I am looking at him and finally I say "Okay Fin, I give up – I don't know." And he said "Well, now that I'm seven I'm going to try new foods!"

That story has stuck in my mind, not just because it's a cute story, but because it was really a turning point for me personally. I remember sitting and thinking that what I hoped would happen, actually happened, that he was living a happy childhood in a stable family and trying new foods when he turned seven. Everything that I wanted for him seemed in that moment to be real.

Shari: Like his biggest challenge in life, was to try new foods!

Garrett: Right, yeah he might have to try a tangerine or something!

Shari: Can you talk about the extended family connections and the relationships that have been created through your open adoption?

Garrett: The families have joined together. If I see one of Fin's parent's siblings, for example, it feels like meeting a relative at a family reunion – someone I don't see all the time, but I know them and they're family.

My wife and Joell are friends, they often talk and plan times for us to get together. My mother also is very involved and is integral in arranging things. Fin's birthmother is friends with my sisters, she still lives around here and we see her at gatherings. It feels like a big extended family with people to whom I feel related even though I know there is no blood relation.

Shari: Can you talk about some of those interconnections?

Garrett: Before Fin went off to college, my son Zach wanted to learn to play the drums. Fin is a very good drummer, so for several months we went to his house every Saturday and he'd have his drum lesson with his big brother. Fin came with us when we went to Disneyland. Also my daughter had a gymnastics tournament in Eugene so Fin came with us to that and cheered her on. My daughter and son were in Joell's music class for many years.

Shari: So Fin is at college now. What's he studying?

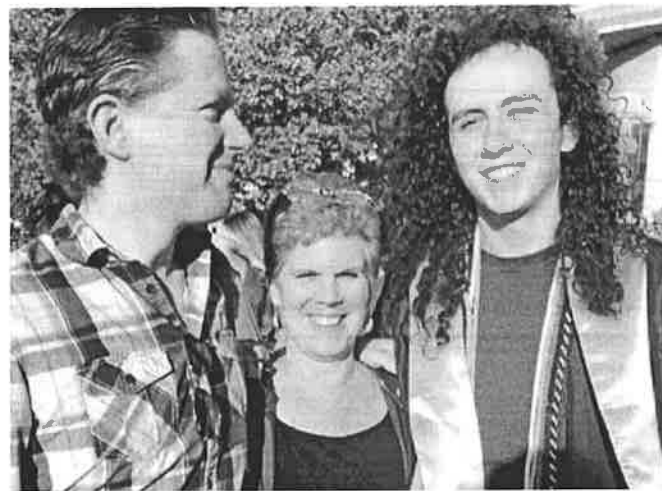
Garrett: I'm bursting with pride to say, that he was admitted to the jazz program which is very selective. He's a music major and lives in a special dorm with other music students and trundles his big ol' stand-up base all around campus.

Shari: So much has happened since Fin's birth. If you could go back in time, what would you tell your 19-year-old self?

Garrett: I would encourage myself to be there for him and I'd say to myself, "I'm looking back on it now and I can tell you that it will not only be valuable to him, but valuable to you too."

It's been an absolute joy and pleasure to be a part of his life. Every moment that I have with him, to me, is a privilege. I would tell myself to look forward to that because at the beginning – and I don't want to minimize this in any way – there's a sense of loss and a failure.

Shari: Do you think the negative stereotypes in our culture around adoption led you as a birthfather to feel that sense of failure?



Birthfather Garrett and birthgrandmother Lisa celebrate with Fin at his high school graduation.

Garrett: It wasn't the adoption that felt like the failure. And maybe it's because I already knew so many people who were adopted – people in my family, and some of my friends. But I did feel like I wasn't able to do what I was supposed to do – provide a normal stable home and have a job, for example. It was a sobering moment realizing, "Oh my God Garrett, you would not be a good father at this point". That's what really felt like a failure.

Shari: As you saw Fin thrive over the years was that sense of failing him lifted? Did you feel that you had created a family for him and that you are a part of that family?

Garrett: Yes, absolutely. That was part of the pleasure to me – of seeing what I hoped he would have – was the life and childhood that he did have. You have to let go of your ego a little bit and realize it's the important thing for him.

Shari: Do you think the values of inclusion and acceptance you felt from the adoptive parents, were the same core values that guided how they raised Fin?



Fin (in red shirt) with adoptive mom Joell, birthfather Garrett and adoptive dad Hans, (l-r).

Garrett: I do think so. I respect and admire both of them a lot and would even if there were no family relationship between us. They are wonderful people – wonderful parents. Honestly I often

try to model my own parenting, now that I am muddling through it, on the way that they are with Fin.

Shari: How would you describe Fin now: his personality, his traits, what he believes in?

Garrett: He is such a mix of me, his birthmother, and his parents. He's fairly reserved but also a very engaged person. He has a lot of interests, he's very smart in my view – maybe colored a little bit. One thing that I have really noticed when watching him relate to younger children is that he's so good at empathizing with them. It's something I really admire. He's very dedicated, very thoughtful. Like me, he overthinks a lot of things. I see it in my own kids too, "Well dad if dragons were real they would not be able to live in this climate because..." He's very analytical, but also intensely creative with the music career he is pursuing. I like everything about him.

Shari: How has your open adoption experience shaped you? How has it changed your view of family and parenting?

Garrett: It has profoundly affected me in every way. It made me more thoughtful than I might otherwise have been about when I was ready to have my own kids. I really felt proud to be at a point where I could raise kids. For me, that was a milestone.

It's made me more open to interacting with people. Having relationships is something I was very uncertain about at the beginning, and yet I got put into this situation where it was my responsibility to have relationships. Now it's one of the things I am most happy about in my life.

One distinct change is that initially I was opposed to the idea of an open adoption on the theory that it would be confusing and difficult and

weird. Now I have the opposite view – that a closed adoption is weird and confusing.

To see that Fin was happy and having the life that I thought he deserved, that he wanted me to be a part of it, and that was important to him made it all come together for me.

- Birthfather Garrett

Shari: What would you like the world to know about open adoption and specifically this model of open adoption? There's a lot of imposter open adoptions out there, where they're selling openness, but it's not very genuine, and that is apparent in the relationship that follows.

Garrett: I've spoken with women of an earlier generation of closed adoption and from what I've gathered from their stories, they were given no choice. Every possible choice was taken from them.

I think that this is an infinitely better model. One of the things that attracted me to Hans and Joell, and to this agency in particular, was that the commitment to respect was real. And, the reason I came around to open adoption was out of a respect for Fin and the choices that I would either take from him or let him make himself. I wanted him to make the choices himself.

For me it's absolutely been positive; it's been what I hoped it would be. It's painful, particularly at the beginning. It's a loss that one has to reckon with, but there's a joy in the mourning.

Shari: Do you feel that it was the fact that you did reckon with that loss that enabled you to have this relationship?

Garrett: I do, and I also think that coming into this as a choice is what made it so positive. The respect I felt from his parents and this agency was very important to me. When people are given a choice and make that choice consciously, it's much easier to deal with the loss in that situation. As time went on all the reasons I made this choice turned out to be good reasons. I was very happy about that.



Fin with birthmother Katherine.

... "Pioneer Birthparents" continued from Page 4

Shari: We often hear from the kids who were placed through our agency how powerful it is for them to know that their birthparents hand-selected their adoptive family. They were literally entrusted to this family; it wasn't random at all.

Garrett: Yeah, Absolutely. I'm not surprised to hear that that's important to them.

Shari: Now that Finn is starting to live this independent college life, do you think you'll still have a strong relationship with Hans and Joell? Do you have a friendship with them that is separate from Finn?

Garrett: Yes, I deeply admire both of them. I would be proud to be friends with them and see that relationship continuing. Since Finn is off at college now I think we're all figuring out how things will be the same and different. I'm looking forward to figuring it out.

Shari: Any other closing thoughts or takeaways?

Garrett: For me it's been fantastic in the sense that what I wanted for Finn I got to actually see him get, and still be a part of his life. Moving into the future is one of the most important things that I have in my life.

Shari: Where is everyone now?

Garrett: My wife and I and our three children live in Portland, as do Hans and Joell. I work as an attorney. Finn is going to college in Eugene.

... Continued on Page 7



Garrett with wife Bayra and their children Nate, Zayaa and Zach.

A family is born.

Curious about how an open adoption placement begins? This video pulls back the curtain.

Fin's family participated in a video produced by OA&FS when Finn was 11. In this, his birthparents Garrett and Katherine recount their hospital experiences, and adoptive parents Joell and Hans share how they felt at the time that Finn was born and entrusted to them.

Their stories convey the rich emotion that forms the foundation of their relationship, and the mutual trust, respect and compassion each demonstrates. ■



Watch Video: The Placement and Entrustment Ceremony.

An Open Adoption Timeline: GARRETT & FIN.

be brave

1999



Feeling relieved that we found a family for Fin in this photo taken for a newspaper article on open adoption.



REMEMBER: RIGHT NOW



Christmas at Fin's house - feeling happy to be included in the festivities.



CELEBRATE EVERY TINY VICTORY

At the Oregon Forestry Center - enjoying taking Fin and his brother out for activities.



Back in the Northwest and glad to see Fin more often.



Fun times at Disneyland! Fin was a good babysitter for the little ones.

GOOD DAY



Feeling proud during Fin's senior year of high school. Things had really come full circle.



2018

FAMILY

Pioneer BIRTHPARENTS: MELISSA

... "Pioneer Birthparents" continued from Page 5

Interview: Birthmother Melissa

Shari: Where did your story start?

Melissa: I was 14 and a freshman in high school when I found out I was pregnant. Initially the birthfather and I planned to parent, and it wasn't until about 7 months into the pregnancy that we decided to consider adoption, but not before we went through many months of trying to figure out what parenting would look like and exploring every avenue and dealing with a lot of pushback from family and friends. The only way I would have considered adoption was through an open adoption.

Shari: What values have guided your open adoption relationship?

Melissa: It's evolved so much over the years. Now I can see how much Greg and Jan as adoptive parents were willing to meet us where we were at as birthparents. They accepted me for who I was and always seemed to genuinely value me and my importance in Brianna's life. They even accepted my imperfections and celebrated those too. We were and are a family: just like any biological family.

Looking back I also think that, I was doing the work of letting go of mothering my daughter and trusting them by releasing her into their care.

Shari: What qualities do you see from the adoptive parents that allowed you to do that?

Melissa: It was their willingness to value our place in her life that allowed me to feel I didn't have to prove myself, or prove my worth.

It wasn't just lip service, they actually walked that walk in terms of including us, and inviting us, and wanting us to be a part of their family. I didn't have to worry that at some point they were going to

exclude me from Brianna's life or from their lives. They were always very encouraging, welcoming and trusting of me—which allowed me to then reciprocate that.

Shari: They seemed to provide their unconditional acceptance to Brianna too, and she seems very secure in her adoption.

Melissa: Yes, she does appear to be quite comfortable in that part of her identity. It doesn't seem to be something that she grapples with at all.

Shari: What do you think people need to come to the table with in order to be successful in their open adoption?

Melissa: I would encourage all parties to come to the table with a genuine sense of curiosity, willingness to learn, and openness.

It really helps when everyone is open to the idea that we all have a special and unique place in this child's life. The goal, ultimately, is to allow the child to explore all parts of themselves in a safe space and with a family that is loving and caring.

My philosophy is that if we walk through life thinking I, as an individual, am superior to this other human who walks on this planet with me—I just think that sets you up for all kinds of falsehoods and missed opportunities to really learn from other

Seeing how quickly and naturally we melded into one family helped to shift my idea of what it means to be a family and how people create families.

- Birthmother Melissa

Melissa and Brianna: THEN AND NOW.



people. Children can get so much value from so many different people and different experiences in life. Adoptive families can have so much to offer, but that doesn't have to replace something else.

As a parent in general, anytime that you set up a scenario where something is off limits or "we can't talk about it", children rail against that, nobody wants to be told that "you cannot have information about this". Anytime there is a hard stop—people generally don't like that. I don't think children, even from a young age, are any different.

Shari: If you think back to your 14- or 15-year-old self and the ideas that you had about family, how has your open adoption experience expanded those views?

Melissa: Seeing how quickly and naturally we melded into one family helped to shift my idea of what it means to be a family and how people create families. It's not like we "feel" like family or we're "sort of" like family, we are family and it's just as valid and genuine as any other.

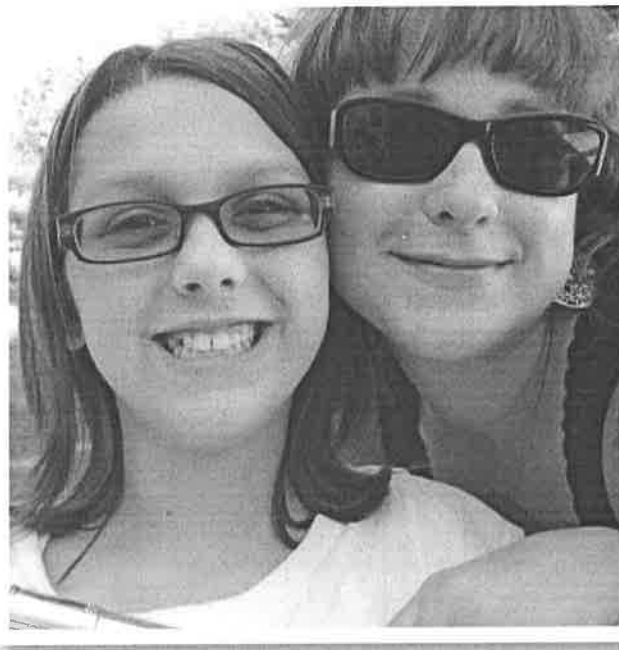
Shari: In the beginning did you have a vision, or a hope, of who Brianna would become? How would you describe her now?

Melissa: She is incredibly well-rounded and a genuinely thoughtful person. She's super caring and really compassionate about all people's different experiences in life. She's a huge advocate for equality and human rights and all kinds of things that I couldn't have necessarily wished for her at that time, but now I am just super inspired by what a great person she is becoming and I'm sure that will continue to evolve.

We went to the Women's march together in D.C. It was such a profound experience to have this badass moment with my birth daughter and her friends, who are incredible and coming into their sense of themselves as young women.

Shari: How has your experience as a birthmom impacted your worldview?

My experience has certainly solidified my very strong beliefs that people need to be in control of their own reproductive decision-making because it is such a profoundly life-changing experience regardless of what decision they make.



Brianna with her birthmother Melissa, (l-r).

With Brianna, I can say yes I had a pregnancy, it was unintended, and I weighed all kinds of options and ultimately my choice was to place you in an adoption, and you have now lived that experience as an adoptee. We can also celebrate that it doesn't have to be everyone's choice, all choices are valid.

Shari: How has your relationship with the adoptive parents evolved over the years?

Melissa: Early on in the relationship, everything centered around the children. Over the years as Brianna got older, and as her brother got older, there's been times when we visit where the children might not even be there. We came to enjoy one another above and beyond

the children and we shared a genuine interest in what was going on in one another's lives.

Shari: Given the experience that you've had, what would you want to tell people about open adoption?



Brianna with her birthfather Steve.

Melissa: Open adoption can be used interchangeably with so many different types of adoption that I don't believe are genuinely open.

It needs to be entered with this fundamental belief that we all are valuable in this relationship. As soon as you start taking away any pieces of that value system—it becomes a game of Jenga, and the whole thing would just fall apart.

I can say what adoption is not: saving a child from bad parents and being rescued by good parents. That sets everyone up for failure—even if it's called open. It's implied that there's the good guy and the bad guy, and the child is just a pawn in that game, and that's not in the best interest of a child.

A true open adoption is based on the idea of a family—whatever that family may look like -- coming together from a place of intention and making a choice together that is not influenced by ulterior motives or other people's assumptions.

My experience of open adoption is that it is something much greater than just adoption and just the creation of a family, it is really a way of living and a way of going through life in terms of the value system we create.

It needs to start with the mindset of I'm going to enter into this experience of creating and expanding my family beyond the child— by welcoming these other people into my world. We'll all have a really special place in this family.

We're going to set into this big huge adventure together and we will come out of that with a well-balanced child that is loved, comes into a place of their own identity and hopefully can get a little something from everyone.

Shari: Where is everyone now?

Melissa: Brianna lives and goes to college in Philadelphia. Greg and Jan live in Northern Virginia. Brianna's biological father lives in Kansas. My partner Jason and I live in Portland with our three

children. I have a step-son who is 13 and two young daughters who are 5 and 6 1/2 that are Brianna's half-siblings. I work as a Registered Nurse.



The power of choice surfaced throughout Garrett and Melissa's stories and affected the lives of all of the participants in deeply meaningful ways. What is this illusive act called "choice"? Choice has been politicized, but it is simply "the act of selecting or making a decision when faced with multiple possibilities". It is a fundamental right and immensely important to the human condition. Choice gives us agency over our lives and affirms that our thoughts and beliefs matter. The element of choice is especially essential in adoption, since it is such a life-altering experience.

Garrett, at the young age of 19, recognized that his choices were different from the birthmother's. She could choose between parenting, abortion and adoption. But for him there were only two forks in the road; to be involved, or not to be involved. By being involved he could have a voice in the pregnancy decision, but the ultimate choice was in the birthmom's hands. It also

It really helps when everyone is open to the idea that we all have a special and unique place in this child's life.

- Birthmother Melissa



Melissa (center) with her family: Stepson Tucker, partner Jason, their daughters Bonnye Ray and Mabel Jay and birthdaughter Brianna, (l-r).

An Open Adoption Timeline: MELISSA & BRIANNA.

1997



family TIME

Our first meeting. Little did I know about what an incredible journey would follow.

Our first visit after Brianna was born. It was a magical holiday week.



A family reunion visit, and Brianna's first birthday celebration.

BIG DAY

We really started seeing more of Brianna's resemblance to me around this time.



Celebrating Steve's marriage. Brianna was a very honored flower girl.

I was going through a tough personal time and was so grateful for our irreplaceable relationships.



RELAX

Women's March in D.C.! What a pivotal moment for both of us. I value this experience so much. It was priceless to share it with Brianna and some of her closest friends.

2018



occurred to him that by being involved, he would give his son, Fin, a choice: to have a relationship with him or not.

Acknowledging everyone's right in adoption to make choices requires letting go of control over the outcome. But I suppose if you live long enough you come to the realization that you never had control over the outcome to begin with, especially if it involves the actions of other people. There is something fundamentally empowering about being trusted to make a choice. Garrett had faith that the birthmom, Fin and the adoptive parents would make the best, most thoughtful choices they could.

The thread of choice and intentionality was reflected in every part of their open adoption. Knowing that his choice to be involved was a conscious decision, helped Garrett move through the grief process. Knowing that his parents were hand-selected by his birthparents, allowed Fin to feel he had been genuinely entrusted by his birthparents into the care of his parents. As Fin grew into adulthood, he chose to deepen the relationships within his birth family by teaching drumming lessons to Garrett's children and going to Disneyland with Garrett's family.

Melissa explored her options thoroughly during her pregnancy. This experience led her to form a strong value around the importance of people having control over their reproductive choices, free from the influence of others. She believes that when









a pregnancy option is framed as the "right choice" it's dismissive of the individual's experience and the fact that none of the choices are easy. Her contention is there isn't a type of woman who chooses to parent, or to terminate the pregnancy, or to plan an adoption. They are all valid choices, and there are women who have made all three choices for different reasons and at different times in their life.

The other essential components to a fulfilling open adoption that were woven into Melissa and Garrett's experiences were inclusion, unconditional acceptance, authenticity, relationship engagement, respect, trust and validation. Validation, in particular seemed to be

a catalyst for the other components. Knowing that she was deeply valued by the adoptive parents inspired Melissa to fully entrust Brianna into the adoptive parent's care. When the adoptive dad shared with Garrett how much Fin cherished their time together, Garrett felt a deep sense of value and worth.

So what makes an open adoption work for all of the players? It starts with the adoptive parents coming to terms with their own losses so they can create an exclusive place for the birthparents. As Melissa says, "Children can get so much value from so many different people and different experiences in life. Adoptive families can have so much to offer, but that doesn't have to replace something else. Open adoption needs to be entered with this fundamental belief that we all are valuable in this relationship."

The Essential Components to a
FULFILLING OPEN ADOPTION.

 Reproductive Choices	 Inclusion	 Unconditional Acceptance	 Authenticity
 Respect	 Relationship Engagement	 Truth	 Validation

Once the birthparents see they are genuinely welcomed, respected and accepted, they can plant the seeds of trust. Over the years, this trust blossoms and a family is formed that surrounds the child with love and honors every person's place in their life.

Every open adoption looks different, just like every extended family looks different. When we are guided by the tenets of compassion, trust and validation, we will create something that's uniquely ours. The legacy of these treasured ingredients will inform the child's choices as they grow and carry these relationships into the next generation. ■