

Keep in Touch

Open Adoptions expand families

by Sally Friedman



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At first, there was no way Sharon Iocono was going to consider her husband Dennis' suggestion that they look into open adoption. Adoption was fine - both agreed to that after frustrating and unsuccessful fertility treatments - but the concept of open adoption, with ongoing contact with the birth mother? Not for Sharon.

Still, she agreed to go to an informational meeting at Adoptions From The Heart. That's when things flip-flopped.

Sharon became intrigued by the notion of keeping up a relationship with their future

child's biological mother, but now Dennis was hesitant. "I think what bothered me back then," he recalls, "was the idea that the birth mother would select us and be in our lives. In the traditional way, families never got involved with the birth mother."

As in so many of life's seeming impasses, Sharon and Dennis worked through the confusing and conflicting feelings with the help of experts, and decided that yes, open adoption was the route they wanted to take.

"Our priority was to become parents," says Dennis. "We began to see open adoption through a child's eyes, and then contact with the birth mother made perfect sense."

So much sense that today, the Ioconos of Barrington share much of their lives - and their children's lives - with the two birth mothers who graciously enabled them to be parents.

Dennis, 47, remembers the fateful day when he and Sharon were to meet Wendy, a 19-year-old pregnant woman. Wendy had selected them after reading their profile and seeing their video and was now eager to meet them, along with an agency social worker. "We didn't know how to act," he says.

Finally, the Ioconos decided to just be themselves. They knew how much was at stake, "...but we needed Wendy to see us as we are," says Dennis.

Wendy must have liked what she saw. In January 1996, Sharon and Dennis were rushing to the Harrisburg area to meet their new baby. It was one of the worst blizzards of modern times followed by torrential rains. The Susquehanna River was overflowing its banks and roads were flooded or closed, but nothing was going to stop these two.

"The social worker met us there, and there were some tears. She was giving us this baby," says Dennis, "and sure, it was great for us, but how would Wendy be able to do this?"

Sharon remembers it as "the happiest day of our lives, and the saddest, too, when we thought of Wendy's feelings. To say it's emotional is such an understatement."

But within seconds of holding the little girl they would name Kylie, Dennis finally knew what it meant to fall in love with a child. So did Sharon.

Two years later, in 1998, they were chosen again. This time, it was by Katie, also 19, from Lancaster. "The wonderful thing was that by then, we already had a relationship with Wendy, who offered to speak to Katie about us." Again, there was a meeting with a social worker and Katie at a restaurant, and again, there was an instant connection.

And this time, the Ioconos were already at the hospital when Katie gave birth to a baby boy. "It was an even more emotional parting the second time, because Katie is quite emotional. She actually carried the baby to the car," says Sharon. "But I think it was easier after that because both birth mothers knew we were determined to have them in our lives, and the lives of our children."

Trevor, now 8, and his sister Kylie, now 11, have a most unusual family life. Once a year, they know they'll be picnicking with their birth mothers at the annual Adoptions from the Heart picnic for adoptive families, new and old. But they also know they'll be with their birth mothers on weekends at Hershey Park, on holidays, on summer vacations, and lately on their birthdays.

No - it's not typical. Not even for an open adoption, which encourages periodic in-person contact and some connection through letters. The Ioconos will be the first to tell you they've definitely gone to happy extremes in how they deal with their children's birth mothers. But they'll also be quick to note that it works wonderfully.

"We are truly like one family," says Dennis. "The birth mothers of our children are part of us, and we've shared experiences we all enjoy. Our next adventure," says this adoptive dad, "is to go to Disney World with 18 family members including Wendy, Katie, their siblings, husbands and significant others."

So - what's going on here?

Open adoption began gaining popularity in the 1970's when researchers linked some of the psychological problems observed in adolescent and adult adoptees to the secrecy of adoption. Today, birth parents arrange to meet the adoptive couple in 69 percent of public and private agency adoptions, according to reports from the National Adoption Information Clearinghouse.

For the biological mother, the benefits of open adoption are clear: "She can choose her baby's parents, and she can keep track of them through pictures, letters and some visits. About two visits a year is typical," says Meredith Erdman of Adoptions from the Heart. "For the adoptive parents, there is the security of knowing the child's roots, medical history and one or both parents."

Erdman agrees the dynamic the Ioconos have established is not typical or even expected in most open adoptions. "The Iocono family has gone way beyond what most adoptive parents do to include the birth mothers in the lives of their children," she says.

There is a language families use, and children learn to use, when explaining their situation to friends. For example, you may hear children in open adoptions often explain of birth mothers, "This is the woman who carried me," and of their adoptive mothers, "This is the woman who parents me."

"Open adoption leaves no unanswered questions for the children," says Erdman. "They know their birth mothers and sometimes even their birth fathers. There is no secrecy."