

How ARE the Children of Open Adoption Doing, Anyway?

2002-2003 Research Project Summary

Open Adoption & Family Services is pleased to release the results of its groundbreaking 2002-2003 client survey project, "Emotional Intelligence in Children of Open Adoption." OA&FS surveyed a total of 171 adoptive parents, birthmothers and adopted children for the project. The study focuses on overall adoption satisfaction and levels of collaboration between birthmothers and adoptive parents, along with the impact these relationships have on the emotional intelligence of children.

The survey results re-confirm the basics: that OA&FS' open adoption relationships are thriving and that families are continuing high levels of contact with birthmothers. **But the survey also breaks some new ground with exciting findings made possible by input from adopted children. We invite you to read on to find out more...**

Methods

Volunteers with research expertise (a counseling graduate student at Marylhurst University, an adoption professional with Oregon Post Adoption Resource Center, a research specialist on staff with Intel, and a psychology professor at University of Puget Sound) helped OA&FS design all questionnaires and obtain a national standardized EQ test. These same volunteers, with back-up support from staff, administered the tests to the children. (All adoptive parent and birthmother surveys were mailed.) Staff entered data from completed questionnaires into a spreadsheet, which was then evaluated by Eugene's Oregon Social Learning Center (OSLC). Using its state-of-the-art computer programs, OSLC, a nonprofit research center with an interest in adoption, analyzed frequency, scales and correlations for all data. The attached summary was written with the guidance and input of OSLC staff member Dr. Leslie Leve, who provided invaluable encouragement and advice.

"Open Adoption and Family Services is to be commended for its careful design of a research study that can help guide the policies and future directions of the agency," said Dr. Leve. "Not only is it rare to see such an agency conduct thoughtful, policy-relevant research in the area of adoption, but this study is one of the first to collect information from birthmothers, adoptive parents *and* the adoptive child 8 to 15 years after the adoption placement."

Open Adoption & Family Services thanks all of the experts who volunteered their time and resources to make this project a success: Jennifer Blakley, the Oregon Social Learning Center, Astrid Dabbeni, Marcia Lipets-Maser and Alisa Ostgard-Murray. The end result is an even greater -- and statistically provable -- confidence that open adoption is working well for our children.

2002-2003 Survey of OA&FS Clients Emotional Intelligence in Children of Open Adoption

In late 2002, Open Adoption & Family Services mailed surveys measuring several components of healthy adoption relationships and overall adoption satisfaction to 143 birthmothers and 156 adoptive parents of children ages 7 to 18. In addition, surveys measuring emotional intelligence were administered to their children, in person when possible. A total of 455 adults and children were asked to participate in the survey. **Completed surveys were gathered from 92 adoptive parents, 38 birthmothers and 41 children – for a 38 percent response rate.** The results include 11 complete triads (child, birthmother and adoptive parent).

Along with evaluating overall adoption satisfaction, the aim of the study was to gauge the level of healthy collaboration between adoptive parents and birthmothers – and to determine whether these collaboration levels correlate with children's emotional intelligence scores. (Collaboration was determined with questions focusing on: feelings of being valued and respected; feelings of mutual compatibility; ability to demonstrate communication skills, conflict resolutions skills and empathy; and ability to create and access support systems.)

The results show that these clients' open adoption relationships are thriving. Triad members are continuing high levels of contact, have good relationships with one another, and are satisfied with the outcomes of their adoption arrangements. In addition, the children scored above the national average on an emotional intelligence test measuring skills such as adaptability and the ability to understand and communicate feelings. The following major findings show how adoption satisfaction, collaboration and emotional intelligence are interrelated.

Summary of Major Findings

- **Families have high levels of ongoing contact:** 80% of adoptive parents and birthmothers reported ongoing visits between the birthmother and child at least once a year -- *7 to 18 years after placement*.
- **Ongoing contact is linked to adoption satisfaction:** As the amount of contact (through visits, phone calls and letters) between birthmothers and adoptive families increases, so does overall adoption satisfaction as reported by all triad members.
- **Families are collaborating:** 91% of adoptive parents and birthmothers reported high levels of healthy collaboration with one another.
- **The children score high in emotional intelligence:** 94% of the adopted children are at or above national averages for emotional intelligence. 53% of these children are considered *highly* above average.
- **Adoption satisfaction is related to emotional intelligence:** When triad members report high levels of adoption satisfaction, children score higher on emotional intelligence tests.
- **Healthy collaboration is related to emotional intelligence:** Children who perceive strong levels of collaboration between their adoptive parents and birthparents score higher on emotional intelligence tests.



To summarize: Ongoing visits contribute significantly to open adoption satisfaction. As open adoption satisfaction increases for triad members, so do levels of healthy collaboration between birthmothers and adoptive parents. Emotional intelligence in children increases with their perception of healthy collaboration between birthmothers and adoptive parents.

Demographics:

The 92 adoptive parents surveyed reported the following about their children:

- 54% are female and 46% are male. (Females scored a bit higher, overall, than males.)
- 92% were newborns or infants up to three months at the time of placement.
- 30 children were ages 7 to 12 at the time of the survey, and 11 were ages 13 to 18.
- 20% were adopted between 1985 and 1989, 60% between 1990 and 1994, and 21% between 1995 and 1998.

Of the 130 birthmothers and adoptive parents surveyed:

- 91% placed or adopted when their child was a newborn or infant up to three months old.
- 21% placed or adopted between 1986 and 1989, 59% between 1990 and 1994, and 20% between 1995 and 1998.
- 79% of adoptive parent surveys were completed by adoptive moms, 15% by adoptive dads and 5% by moms and dads together.

Adopted Children

Summary of Major Findings:

- Children ages 13 to 18 who report strong feelings of love and acceptance from both adoptive parents and birthmothers score higher on emotional intelligence scales.
- Children's emotional intelligence scores are higher when triad members report high levels of compatibility with one another.

Summary of Emotional Intelligence Scores:

Open Adoption & Family Services first determined the emotional intelligence of children using the BarOn Emotional Quotient Inventory published by Multi-Health Systems, a standardized test with national norms.

Components include:

Intrapersonal Scale, measuring the ability to understand one's emotions and communicate feelings and needs.

Interpersonal Scale, measuring the quality of relationships, ability to listen, and ability to understand the feelings of others.

Emotion Regulation Scale, measuring levels of calm, ability to work under pressure and ability to respond to stressful situations.

Adaptability Scale, measuring flexibility, ability to manage change, and ability to find positive ways of dealing with everyday problems.

The above scales were combined for the **Total Emotional Intelligence** score, indicating how well an individual deals with daily life and how happy he/she is:

94% of children surveyed are at or above the national average, with 26% of these considered high in emotional intelligence, 17% considered very high in emotional intelligence and 10% considered markedly high in emotional intelligence.

Open Adoption & Family Services Emotional Intelligence Survey A second emotional intelligence questionnaire, designed by Open Adoption & Family Services, was administered to the children in addition to the nationally standardized test. The results were very positive, strongly correlating with those of the national EQ instrument. Questions focused on overall adoption satisfaction, as well as levels of empathy, self-awareness, flexibility, social ease, self-regard, role security and feelings of being loved and accepted. A sample of the questions and responses follows:

I like who I am.

100% agree

I feel positive about life.

100% agree

I feel wanted.

100% agree

My adoptive family and birth family are good friends.

82% agree

It is important to me that my birthmother and my parents like each other.

91% agree

My birthmother likes my parents.

93% agree

I think my parents respect my birthmother.

100% agree

I look forward to visits from my birthmother.

91% agree

I think knowing my birthmom is important.

87% agree

My birthmother wants to keep in touch with me.

91% agree

I find it easy to make friends.

91% agree

I feel that there are a lot of grown-ups in my life who love me.

100% agree

I feel being adopted has helped me to

I feel being in an open adoption has made me a more

understand many points of view.
82% agree

sensitive and loving person than other kids my age.
91% agree

Birthmothers

Summary of Major Findings:

- **95% of birthmothers gave positive overall evaluations of their open adoptions.**
- **92% reported high levels of feeling respected and honored in their open adoption relationships.**

Below is a brief sample of birthmother questions and answers:

By placing my child in an open adoption, I feel I have truly made the best decision for both my child and me.
100% agree

My overall experience with open adoption has been positive.
95% agree

Ongoing contact with my child's family helps me feel better about my adoption decision.
90% agree

I like my child's parents.
95% agree

I feel my child's parents respect my role as birthmother.
87% agree

I feel as though my child's family has a deep respect for me personally.
90% agree

I feel our initial adoption contact agreement has been honored.
87% agree

My child's parents make me feel like a welcome part of the family.
87% agree

I respect the way my child is being raised.
97% agree

My child's adoptive parents have handled this adoption with sensitivity and love.
97% agree

My child's parents and I have open and honest communication.
90% agree

I feel my involvement in my child's life is helping him/her form a strong sense of identity.
82% agree

It is important for me to know my child feels loved by both me and his/her adoptive parents.
100% agree

I feel that the relationships that develop from the open adoption experience have added to my child's emotional maturity.
82% agree

My child seems confused about who his/her parents are.
92% disagree

My child seems well adjusted and happy.
97% agree

Adoptive Parents

Summary of Major Findings:

- **91% reported high levels of feeling respected and honored in their open adoption relationships.**
- **92% of adoptive parents gave positive overall evaluations of their open adoptions.**

Below is a brief sample of birthmother questions and answers:

I feel that open adoption is the best way to approach the adoption process.

93% agree

I have great respect for my child's birthmother.

86% agree

I worry my child's birthmother is monitoring or evaluating my parenting style.

92% disagree

I feel my child's birthmother respects and supports my role as my child's parent.

89% agree

My child's birthmother intimidates me.

97% disagree

I feel my child's relationship with his/her birthmother is very important.

80% agree

I feel it is important for my child to know as much about his/her heritage as possible.

97% agree

I feel a closed adoption may have been easier on everyone emotionally.

87% disagree

My child seems well adjusted and emotionally secure.

89% agree

I feel comfortable initiating a dialogue with my child about his feelings about open adoption.

95% agree

Areas for Growth

Several questions received a 75% or lower positive response rate. Few of these questions received a resounding negative response; most were neutral. But OA&FS views these questions as areas for potential relationship skills growth, and plans to address them with a collaboration skills workshop scheduled for early 2004. General themes among these questions indicate that adoptive parents and birthmothers would benefit from supplemental training regarding: identifying with one another and focusing on similarities; working together to help children better understand open adoption; and communicating during times of conflict and disagreement.

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